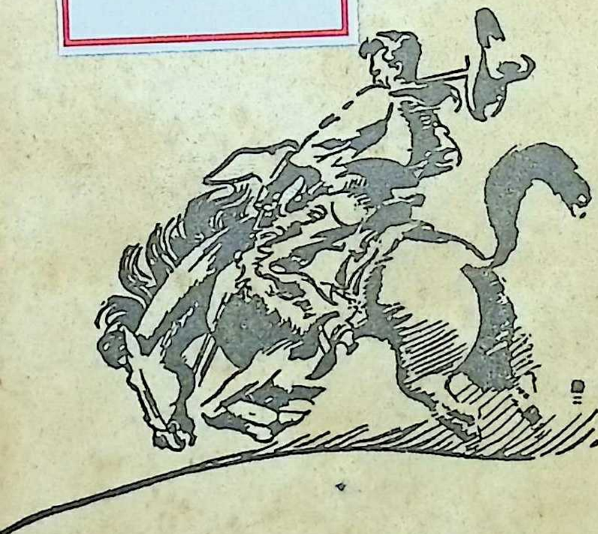
LITTLE RIVER VALLEY

J. E. GRINSTEAD



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CHAPTER I

PLANTING THE SEED

THAT a chunk of lead is an unusual and unnatural seed, and a human heart strange planting ground, is admitted. Still, many queer things have grown from such planting.

A stranger riding into the single street of Paint Hill, on that late March day of the year 1875, and unaccustomed to the freakish weather of the Central Texas plain, must have been puzzled. His first thought would have been that he had come upon a caravan of white camels. A stranger did ride into the old cow-town on that day, but he was not puzzled at all. He knew that those white camels were cow ponies, each with a slicker thrown over its saddle, and the whole mass covered with snow, which was falling thick and fast, and melting almost as it fell, for there was no breath of frost in the air. As one wizened puncher had put it, only the day before, "Wild onions and pitchin' grass was comin' fine in the low places, and in a few days there'd be plenty grass to work cattle on."

The stranger kept his way along the street, where snow-covered ponies stood in groups of two or three, to the number of twenty or more. With the shrewd eyes of the range-rider, he noticed that in all that gathering of saddle-stock only two brands showed on the hips, where animal heat had melted the snow. One of these was a plain, Gothic M J, while the other was J Bar B, the latter being in the majority. The stranger didn't know it at the time, but these were the brands of Mont Jackson and John Banks, respectively, the two largest and leading ranchmen in the Little River country.

This stranger, a lean flat-cheeked young fellow, apparently nearing thirty, had crinkly sandy hair, and surprisingly keen dark brown eyes. He stopped in front of the Bronco saloon, where an exceptionally large knot of the white camels stood, and dismounted. There was a suspicion of a smile on the rider's grim lips, and as he looked at the sign, which was a picture of a mean young bronc getting ready to do things with the rider on its back. Lest any one mistake, there was the single word, in black lettering just beneath the animal's

wicked feet "Bronco." Glancing immediately across the street, the man saw another saloon, on the front of which was painted the same horse, doing things, and the rider fanning its flanks with his hat. Under that picture was the word "Buster." Obviously, the same itinerant sign-painter had lavished his art on both signs, as the horses in the two were identical.

It occurred to the stranger that the Buster might be the more hilarious place of the two, but he was not seeking hilarity, just then. What he wanted was a drink, a chance to warm his lank body, and some information—if he could get it without asking direct questions. So he spread his slicker over his saddle and entered the Bronco. After taking a liberal shot of the soul-cheering liquid, he walked over and sat down by the big drum stove. Here were a dozen or more men, but no one seemed to notice the stranger. A lone puncher, as this man plainly was, was no novelty in Paint Hill. He might be seeking a job in the Little River country. He might be going to any number of places. It was not customary to be inquisitive in the cow country. Nobody asked him his name, which was really Frank Carleton, and he went by it all the time. In fact, no one spoke to him, except when the bartender asked, "What'll it be?" The only time Mr. Carleton spoke was when he said, "Whisky straight."

As the stranger sat warming himself by the big stove there was little about him to attract attention. He was neatly clad in the regulation costume of the range country. A close observer might have noticed that he wore one gun, with a white bone handle, which was curiously milled around the grip to prevent the hand slipping. Also, that there was keen shrewdness in his quick brown eyes. To the casual observer, however, he was just a lone puncher, stopped out of the storm to get a drink and warm a while before riding farther.

At a table within ten feet of Carleton sat two men, both of whom were well past middle age. One of these was tall to slenderness, well over six foot, black hair, slightly shot with grey, piercing dark grey eyes and shaggy brows. Cam Sneed, one of this man's cowboys, had once directed a stranger to the boss by saying, "If you see a fellow six or seven feet tall, with a face like a graveyard with the gate open, that's old Mont Jackson."

The description was good. A smile on Mr. Montgomery

Jackson's face was unusual to say the least. He took life seriously—and also swiftly and with precision, on provocation. Still, Mont Jackson was counted one of the best men in the Little River country—especially good to let alone. The man opposite Jackson was John Banks. He wore shaggy red whiskers, and his blue eyes were set rather nearer a beak nose than the regulations require. Still, John Banks was accounted a good man, and his shrewdness was unquestioned. At the next table to them sat two cowboys, playing pitch. One of these was a fair, handsome young fellow, still a boy, with a mass of soft, curly brown hair, smooth of face, and with a very cupid's bow of a mouth. A thousand times he had been told that he was too pretty for a boy. He had a name, but few knew it. They called him Curly, and let it go at that. Curly was a puncher at Jackson's ranch, known throughout the country as the Mary Jane ranch. The only piece of sentiment old Mont Jackson was ever known to show was when he took his wife's initials for a brand. That had given her little pleasure, for the cow-people had promptly dubbed it Mary Jane, when her name was Martha Joyce.

When the stranger took his seat by the stove, Jackson and Banks were talking about range conditions, the way stock had wintered, and like things that ranchmen would naturally talk about.

"The outlook's all right, far as range is concerned, John, but there's something a whole lot worse than short grass and low water the matter with this cow country," Jackson said presently.

"What's that Mont?" drawled Banks.

"A plumb damned epidemic of rustlin'," snapped old Mont, his grey eyes blazing.

"They ain't bothered me much," and John Banks shifted his eyes just a trifle.

"They've troubled me, and the worst part of it is them trail herds. For three years they drove cattle from up in this country to Rockport and Fulton. They'd come up in here, but a few hundred, road brand 'em and start south. By the time they reached the coast, they'd have a few thousand."

"Yes, I rec'n they was some of that done, but cattle weren't worth a dang then, and nobody didn't pay no attention to it."

"Rustlin' is rustlin', John. Takin' a cow brute that ain't worth but four-bits, is just as much stealin' as takin' one worth four dollars—which is about all steers are bringin' now."

"We-el," drawled Banks, "about all a feller can do when trail herds pass through is to watch them."

"Watch, hell! What good does it do to watch? Cattle are lookin' up a little now, since they got that railroad into Dodge City, Kansas. The result is that the drivin' has set in the other way, up the Chisum trail, and——"

"Well, that's a good thing, far as I can see. It's riz the price of cattle a dollar a head in the last year."

"Yes, they've gone up a little, but that don't help a fellow that ain't got any to sell. They've stole me to a ten-cent ante. Every herd that goes through breaks the law."

"What law, Mont?"

"Why the law that says a man's got a right to cut any herd that crosses the range."

"That ain't ary law, Mont."

"Hell, it ain't. It used to be the law, before this trail drivin' began."

"No. It never was anything but a sort of unwritten law."

"Maybe so, but if that's all it was it was the best law that was ever unwritten. A dang sight better than some they're passing down there at Austin now. Puttin' inspectors at Red River, and at the stealin'-pens on the coast, to sell out for whatever they can get and put the money in their pockets. I can do my own inspectin', and from here on I'm going' to do it. An honest man don't object to his herd being cut, and I ain't got no respect for a thief on no part of the ground."

"You're talkin' too hard, Mont," said John Banks. "A man ain't necessarily a thief 'cause he don't want a lot of whoopin' punchers ridin' through his herd and choustin' 'em to hell and back."

"Oh, hell, John! You talk like all the rest. I been trying to get the fellers in here on Little River, and up the Brazos a ways, to go in with me and cut these herds in spite of hell and high water. The truth of the matter is, everybody's so damned busy trying to maverick stuff from his neighbour that he ain't got time to watch the real thieves."

A dark, handsome young fellow had just come into the place and had taken a seat where he could sweat the game of

pitch. When Mont Jackson made that statement the newcomer frowned and turned facing the older men, while Curly made some remark in a low tone to the man he was playing with.

"Why, Mont, you're gettin' plumb rough in yo' remarks," said Banks, and two green glints came into his blue eyes. "I reck'n everybody mavericks some. You go to talkin' like that, and pretty soon you won't have no neighbours nor no friends."

"I ain't beggin' to be either neighbourly or friendly with a man that steals my stuff. I don't maverick nothin'. I been in the cow business a long time, and I got along 'thout ever putting the M J on a calf that was follerin' a neighbour's cow."

"Why, Mont, you've plumb lost yo' head," protested Banks, his hands itching for his gun and not daring to start after it. "You and me has got the two biggest herds in the Little River country. We always been neighbours and worked cattle together. We don't want to fall out now."

"I ain't fallin' out with nobody. I been telling' you fellers the last two-three year I weren't satisfied with the way business was being did. I've talked to the little fellows that's got a few cows, and they say, 'What's the use of us comin' in, onless the other big fellers joins?' I'm just puttin' the world on notice how I'm goin' to run the old Mary Jane from here on. I don't want nothin' but what's mine, but I aim to take my stuff wherever I find it. More than that, I'm going to cut the next trail herd that crosses my range, law or no law, help or no help, hell or no hell!"

Pushing back his chair, old Mont rose to his enormous height and stood waiting for some one to question his right to do as he said he would.

"Oh, hell, Mont," said old John Banks, with a stiff-lipped grin, and white under his whiskers, "come on and take a drink. Yo' liver needs a stimulant."

"I'll drink with you," replied Mont, "but it won't change my views none," and the two stepped to the bar.

At the same time, Curly and the dark-haired newcomer were talking in low tones. This rather handsome, dark, swaggering young fellow was Bert Banks, the only son of old John Banks and the direct opposite of his father—at least in appearance. Curly and Bert walked out of the saloon together, while the two old ranchmen had their backs turned at

the bar. The man with whom Curly had been playing cards was a J Bar B puncher named Parker. He kept his seat at the table by himself, toying with the pitch. Just as Jackson and Banks set their glasses on the bar, after drinking, there was the roar of two shots sounding almost as one in the street.

Two shots, or a dozen shots, in the main street of Paint Hill was no novelty, yet for some reason those in the Bronco Saloon rushed to the door and finally out nto the street. Even the stranger rose and walked to the door and stood looking over the heads of those on the ground. A little knot of men had gathered around where Curly lay, a bullet in his heart, while his blood stained the wet snow in an ever widening circle. Bert Banks was just putting his gun back into the holster.

The city marshal came up, and the two old ranchmen pushed forward to where he stood. A few questions were asked, and Bert Banks admitted that he had killed Cury.

"There was nothin' else to do," and he shrugged his shoulders. "He jerked his gun and came at me, and I shot him."

Two J Bar B punchers who had been crossing the street together were the only eye-witnesses to the killing. They corroborated Bert's statement. There was nothing to be done. Apparently it was just one of those killings where the fastest man won out. Bert Banks wasn't touched. If the words that Bert spoke to Curly, after following him out of the saloon, were heard by the witnesses, they made no mention of it. The fact was, it had been a reference Bert made to old Mont Jackson that caused Curly to draw.

An M J puncher, and one whom his companions loved, had been killed by a member of the J Bar B outfit. There might have been a gun battle over the incident, but the M J men were a cool-headed lot. They were outnumbered two to one and outclassed as gun-fighters. Bert Banks was considered the fastest man with a gun in the Little River country, and there were others in his gang that were almost as swift.

By the time the little excitement had subsided, the stranger, Frank Carleton, had quietly mounted his horse and ridden out of town. No one noticed when he left or what direction he took. It was a good while before any of those who saw him in the Bronco recalled his presence there on that

occasion. Nothing could have made them believe that this passing stranger had any bearing on future events in the Little River country.

It was late afternoon when the killing occurred. The undertaker was notified, and a little later the body of Curly, an innocent, harmless boy, who had lost his life because he refused to hear the name of his employer traduced, was laid to rest. Friend and foe alike took turns at the shovels in filling the grave. They were a close-mouthed lot, and nothing was said. It was drawing on towards night when the grave was finally patted smooth and a board-marker placed at the head and foot.

Then the punchers took another drink all around and rode out of town. John Banks and his majority, consisting of fifteen men, rode north-east towards the J Bar B, while the M J men rode south towards the Mary Jane, which was seven miles from Paint Hill. Curly had ridden in with old Mont Jackson, earlier in the day. Mont now rode alone, and very thoughtful, in the vanguard of his little cavalcade. Only six men followed him. They rode in pairs, with Cam Sneed and Lew Pafford, side partners and inseparable companions, bringing up the rear.

"Weather's a hell of a thing," commented Cam.

"How come?" asked Lew.

"How come! Why look at this. If it wouldn't have been for this snow, all them punchers wouldn't have been at the Hill to-day. Curly would have been at home, helpin' with something about the house, instead of——"

"Bert was apt to kill him some day, anyway."

"Mebbe so, but——"

"You don't seem satisfied about that mess, Cam. What's yo' idea?"

"I got several I ain't namin' but I'll name this one. There's something to this thing that you and me don't know. I never seen old Man Mont's face look so much like a graveyard as it looked when he left Curly's grave, and I never seen him and old John Banks part without shakin' hands before."

"I wondered if you noticed that."

"Shore, I did."

"Wonder old Man Mont didn't start something."

"Oh, I don't know. He's right patient and long-sufferin' with a errin' brother. 'Sides that, he knowed you and

me was the only two men he had in town that could get a gun out'n the holster in less'n thirty days. Added to some other things that ain't the matter with old Monty, he ain't no dang fool. He's one of these fellers that's apt to frame up a hell of a job for to-morrow, then do it all at one time, while the sign's right."

"Reck'n he'll lay for the J Bar B outfit, sometime."

"I ain't reckonin' nothin' about this mess—out loud—except that this little ruckus is the harbinger of some busted hopes."

"Busted hopes? Cam, you're terrible. You'd go and get poetical with a bogged steer on a rainy day."

"Ain't nothing poetical about this, 'cept it turns out to be poetical justice. You was at the Old Settler's picnic last summer, wasn't you?"

"Yep, what of it?"

"Didn't you see Mis' Jackson and old Mis' Banks holdin' hands and smilin' happy at one another, just like a pair of second-hand angels, every time Bert and Clemmie danced together."

"'Course! I reck'n ever'body seen that. Most folks knows it's understood that Bert and Clemmie is goin' to be the connectin' dewlap that makes the M J and the J Bar B a sort of dang Simees twins."

"Shore! Well, them's some of the hopes that's been busted to-day."

"I dunno whether I'd hate to be, or like to be, the feller that tries to take Clemmie away from Bert. They'd be gun work in it, and Bert's right handy."

"Yes," drawled Cam, "he's handy. This makes two he's killed, but, if you notice, nary one of 'em was a real gun-slinger. Looks like he sorter lets that kind alone. I'll just say this much, somebody is going to have to kill Bert Banks. It may be you, it may be me, but some day he's goin' to run ag'in the real thing and either have to take back water or get shot to rags."

They rode on in silence for a mile. Cam Sneed was forty-five, and already iron grey. Lew Pafford was twenty years younger, but his face was tanned and his eyes narrowed by the outdoor life in sun and wind. People wondered what was the tie between the two men.

"Cam, you don't reck'n Clemmie was thinkin' right smart

of Curly and him just a puncher and two-three year younger than her?" Lew said at last.

"Son, I done quit reckonin' about women. They never is no tellin' what they'll do. My guess is that Clemmie had just about got to lookin' on Curly like he was a younger brother and that she thought a lot of him thataway. Couldn't nobody help likin' Curly. I wouldn't wonder she takes this killin' right sudden and hard. Ain't no doubt Bert's been jealous of Curly ever since he'd taken Clemmie to two dances, Christmas, in Old Man Mont's new buggy, but as for how Clemmie felt—my grey hairs protect me from the wiles of women, son. You youngsters will just have to find out what you kin about 'em?"

"Huh! All I know about 'em is they're right nice when they don't scratch. My guess is that when Clemmie finds out about this it'll just about start hell."

"Wrong, Lew. Something else started hell before Curly was ever shot. He just gets ketched in the backwash. Only thing you and me can do is keep our guns oiled, our eyes open and our mouths mostly shut."

That was the last word of the veteran puncher on the subject. Lew knew nothing more would be said by him until there were further developments. They rode in silence to the Mary Jane, unsaddled and went on to the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER II

WHO KILLED HIM AND WHY?

THE Mary Jane ranch-house stood on a slight eminence, overlooking the Little River Valley. The valley, at that time, was a broad and beautiful stretch of open prairie, with a few trees along the banks of the stream. The house was in the edge of the timber which skirted the open valley, and back of it all trees seemed to be climbing the hill. The house itself was two stories high, with two great rooms and a wide wall in front. Across the front ran a broad gallery, also two stories. It was a house of some pretensions, for Montgomery Jackson was a well-to-do man for his time. Once white and easily seen for miles, the building now presented a weathered appearance

not having been painted since the Civil War, and was pretty much the colour of the bare forest trees that stood about it.

The house fronted east, and the north room at the front was the family sitting-room. There was a bunk-shack for the men out back, but in winter, when there were only a few men at the ranch, they " ate like humans" in the big dining-room with the family, all served by the same negro cook, as did also two or three farmhands. Mont Jackson was inclined to be democratic, to a certain point, and his broken fortunes since the war had made him more so, but the family room in his house was still a sacred place. It was a great high-ceiled room, while an open fireplace, guarded by firedogs of the Newfoundland breed, whose expressions never changed, come sunshine or snow, grief or joy.

Mrs. Jackson was a busy little woman, who spent her life telling someone how to do something and usually getting very little attention paid to her. On that particular evening she had to tell one of her farmhands how to feed the turkey and another how to stack wood on the gallery without scarring the paint—supposing there was any paint to scar. After that she had to tell the cook how to stew tripe, and a lot of other things. So she was kept out of the house until she missed something entirely. It was just as well, perhaps. Seemingly, her only mission in life was to tell someone how to do something. Certainly her one great purpose in life was to marry her daughter and only child to Bert Banks, thus making her the richest woman in the Little River country.

As no instructions were needed for what was going forward in the big family room, and as it promised little for the immediate union of the two leading and richest families, it was perhaps as well that she was not there. As a matter of fact, it was a relief to old Mont Jackson that she was absent. The tall old ranchman hung his coat and hat in the hall, walked in, stooped over and warmed his hands by the fire. It was growing dusk and not light enough to read, yet too early, according to the idea of the time, to light candles. At one side of the fireplace a young woman sat, with a book lying in her lap, while the firelight played on her face. She was tall and slender, like her father, but not what could be called a slim girl. Her hair was raven black, and her eyes blue. Her face was that of Old Man Mont, softened a few thousand shades, and she was a queenly, beautiful woman.

"Getting in pretty late, ain't you, Dad?" she asked, as Old Man Mont warmed his hands.

"Little," growled Jackson.

"What kept you?"

"Well—I—reck'n you'll have to know sometime, and I'd as well tell you and have it over with. We——"

"You haven't turned everything over to the bank!" and there was a note of alarm in Clemmie Jackson's voice that was clearly tinged with anger.

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. Morton was pretty nice to me and said he was sure I'd pull out all right." There was a cold wry smile on the ranchman's lips, as he went on, "I think that was because he knew the ranch and stock wouldn't bring more than half I owe him."

"Well, what was it kept you, then?"

"Why, we—we had to bury Curly."

"What! Had to bury Curly? Why—why, is he dead?"

"Don't think we'd bury him alive, do you?" snapped Mont, to hide his own emotions, for he had thought a lot of Curly.

"No—but—oh, I didn't mean to ask a foolish question, but—it don't seem possible, when he was so well and so happy when he left home this morning. How? Who?"

"The last one's right. Who?" said old Mont, grimly.

"Who—who killed him?"

"I hate to tell you, Clemmie, but—it was Bert Banks. He just as good as murdered the boy."

Then a thing happened that nobody, knowing Old Mont Jackson and his slender, queenly daughter, could have believed. She had risen and when the truth flashed to her mind she fell into her father's arms and sobbed her heart out against his breast.

"Oh—how—how—c-ould that ever happen. Curly was so good-natured, and so kind to every one. He—he wouldn't harm anybody. And—and Bert. It—it never could be, now."

"No, I don't reck'n it can, honey," soothed old Mont Jackson, stroking her black hair with his rough, rope-calloused hand. "But be a woman. Don't give way like that. Run along, now, and wash yo' face, and don't let folks see you this way."

Clemmie controlled herself and left the room just in time. Old Mont Jackson didn't know whether her grief was because she loved Curly, as he had sometimes suspected, or because she felt that this murder had lost Bert Banks to her. In his doubt and emotion over the day's events, he swore a frightful oath, just as Clemmie closed one door behind her and Mrs. Jackson opened another.

"Why, Mont Jackson!" she cried. "Whatever on earth are you cussin' thataway for, and right here in the house, too? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I am, Marthy, and I apologize."

"What kept you in town so late?"

"We had to bury Curly!"

"Why—how?"

"Bert Banks shot him to-day."

"I knew it! I told——"

"Mars'r Mont, supper's raidy," said a voice, as a black face appeared at the open door.

"All right, Jim," and old Mont felt relieved. He had an idea what his wife was going to say, and he didn't want to hear it.

The men had filed into the big dining-room and were standing by their chairs, waiting. Clemmie came in and took her place at the table. She had asked herself the question, "What for?" over and over again, but she hadn't asked her father. She wished she had. She wanted to know why Bert Banks had killed Curly but feared to ask.

The meal was a solemn, silent one. Usually there was some conversation, between Clemmie and Curly if no one else talked. To-night there was a studied silence. No one had thought to remove Curly's chair from the table and so arrange the seats that the vacancy would not be noted. The meal was half finished when Mrs. Jackson, who had appeared in deep thought, suddenly spoke up.

"It seems right lonely without Curly," she said, "I'm awful sorry. I told you, Clemmie, not to go to them two dances with Curley. Bertie's high strung and all, and——"

Clemmie suddenly left the table.

"Damn a woman's tongue," old Mont Jackson said under his breath, and frowned at his wife.

The meal was finished in the silence of the tomb.

Back in the living-room, old Mont Jackson sat by the

fire, smoking his pipe. Up to that time his life had been free of serious troubles. Of course, there had been Indian raids and occasional gun-fights at round-ups, battles with rustlers and horse-thieves, and such things as that, but those things were all in the day's work, and he had never shunned them. No man ever had been able to say, truthfully, that Mont Jackson had evaded his share of danger and responsibility. True, the war and the consequent business stagnation had put him heavily in debt, but even that had not worried him greatly. He had taken it very much as he had taken the dry years, when there was short grass and no water for his cattle, hoping bravely for better times.

But here was another matter. In spite of his rough, forbidding exterior, old Mont Jackson had a heart, and those whom he did love, he came very near to worshipping. Of these few, his daughter and only child was the centre. He was never very demonstrative, but he loved her, none the less, and he wanted to see her happy. He was not one of those self-centred old men, who give no thought to anything but the present. He knew better than any one else that he no longer swung to his saddle with the lightness of youth. In the natural order of things, his range-riding days would soon be over. Then, there was always the chance of a stray bullet, a horse falling, or any one of a dozen things common to the life he led, that might put a sudden period to his activities. He didn't grieve over the prospect. He had lived well and fully. But this thing that confronted him now, as he sat alone, while Mrs. Jacskson was out in the kitchen telling Jim how to wash and dry the dishes, couldn't be taken so philosophically.

He had known the desire of his own wife and of Bert's mother to see Bert and Clemmie marry and consolidate the two big ranches. He had said no word to urge the matter, but he had never opposed it. He had told himself that Bert was a little rough, but he had been a bit wild himself in his youth. There was a good chance that the boy would settle down as he grew older. He wanted Clemmie to be happy and get the most out of life. If that could be secured by her marriage to Bert, it was all right with him—up to that day. Now, he was sure that Bert Banks had the heart of a murderer, and old Mont Jackson would stop little short of killing to prevent his daughter's marrying such a man. Then, too, there were some other unformed thoughts in the back of

his head. Outstanding among them was, "Why wouldn't old John Banks, with whom he had neighboured for years, join him in an eyort to stop the epidemic of rustling that was sweeping over the Little River country like a pestilence?"

From pondering that, his mind reverted to Clemmie. He felt sure that she was in her room crying her heart out. Why? Other punchers at the Mary Jane had been killed. Clemmie had been sorry, of course, but no killing ever had brought such a storm of grief to her as this. Was she really in love with Curly, or had she broken down because he had said, in effect, that Bert was a murderer? A cold killer was held in the utmost contempt in the cow country, and Clemmie knew she could never marry Bert, now, with her father's consent. Perhaps that was why she had taken it so hard.

Anyway, the mischief was done now. Old Mont had pondered the problem all the way from Paint Hill home. Why had Bert killed Curly? He had the answer, now. Mrs. Jackson, with her thoughtless, loose lip, had given it at the supper table. Whether it was the right answer or not, it would be accepted by the whole Little River country. His daughter's name would be bandied about cow camps as the woman over whom Bert had killed Curly. In the event that Bert and Clemmie eventually married—which God forbid—tongues would not stop wagging. He could hear them in his mind.

"Who is that tall, lovely woman?"

"That's Mrs. Bert Banks. Bert killed a man over her once."

He could see the woman who made the reply put her finger on her lips, as if to say, "It won't bear talking about. Who knows when he may have to kill another?"

Old Mont, proud as Lucifer himself, writhed at the thought and swore horribly under his breath. He had no premonition at that moment that there were other grave things coming into his life that would cause him to forget his family affairs, for a while at least.

Mrs. Jackson had betaken herself to her room. Mont was good to his wife, and had never mistreated her, still, Mont Jackson's frown was not a pleasant thing to see. His frown at his wife, at the table, was of the blackest. It seemed to carry an almost audible, bitter curse with it.

At long last, when the fire had burned to a bed of

smouldering embers, old Mont Jackson took himself off to bed.

Came morning and all sign of the snow was gone. A balmy breeze was blowing from the south, and birds were singing. The Mary Jane punchers saddled and went about the business of getting ready to work cattle. Old Cam Sneed and Lew Pafford rode down the Little River Valley to bring in a band of saddle horses that had wintered on the range. A mile they rode in silence.

"Lew, I was a right smart prophet about them busted hopes," Cam said, then.

"Looks like it."

"Yes, it shore do. Old Mis' Jackson must have filed the notch on the trigger to her mouth sometime. It goes off right easy."

"Yes," said Lew, in a musing tone, "and onlike most thoughtless shooters, she hits sometimes."

"She hit Old Man Mont right atween the eyes last night. Gosh! If he was to frown at me like that, I'd go to savin' money to buy a coffin."

"Don't you reck'n she was right? Women usually is right about such things."

"Mebbeso. I don't know how right she is, but it ain't goin' to be safe to repeat it and let old Monty find it out. If I had any friends, I'd advise 'em to change the subject if anybody tries to talk to 'em about that killin'. As I ain't got any friends, I'll just advise you thataway."

"Reck'n old Monty would get rough if he knowed it."

"No! Oh, no, he wouldn't get rough. All he'd ever do would be to shoot ary man on earth half in two that laid his lips to a word of harm about Clemmie."

"Well, I don't know as you could call that rough," laughed Lew, "but I don't aim to investigate by layin' myself liable."

The two riders separated and rode around the band of horses. Lew was a happy devil-may-care young fellow, a swift gunman, who could take care of himself anywhere, but level-headed enough to take the advice and counsel of old Cam Sneed.

Cam had been on the Mary Jane ever since he had come back broke from the war. He was the oldest man in the outfit, both in point of service and of years. Also, he

enjoyed and merited the confidence of old Mont Jackson to a greater degree than any other. Jackson had not mentioned the kiling of Curly to Cam, and the grizzled old puncher would never mention it first. Wise in the ways of cow people. Sneed knew that was something other than Bert's jealousy back of the killing of Curly. He didn't know what it was so he kept his own counsel, and went about his work with an open mind, a shut mouth and wary eyes.

CHAPTER III

SHAG SANDERS IS STUBBORN

It was afternoon of the third day after the snow at Paint Hill. A hundred and fifty miles south of that place it was hot, summery weather. At a well-known trail crossing on the Colorado River, just where that stream begins to flow sluggishly into the coastal plain, a man sat quietly on his horse. His coat and vest were tied behind his saddle with his slicker. He had removed his chaps, and laid them across the saddle in front of him. He had untied his necktie and opened the collar of his shirt. It was hot for that time of the year—or any other time!

Thus sat Frank Carleton, late a transient stranger in the Bronco saloon at Paint Hill. He was idly watching five thousand long-horned steers swim the stream and scramble up the bank. Riders dashed frantically about, urging the leaders on, to make room for others that were coming across. Carleton made no move to help. His horse was gaunt and drawn and stood with hanging head. Clearly, it had been ridden far and fast.

The stream of cattle poured on across the river. The mass was so thick that a man could have made a bridge of their backs. Occasionally a weak one would sink, rise again, swim a few feeble strokes, then disappear for good. No heed was paid to it. Perhaps it had cost the owner of the herd a dollar. More likely, it had cost him nothing. At last the tailings of the herd were pushed in, and the riders followed them across.

The last man to reach the bank was a giant fellow,

almost as tall as old Mont Jackson, and heavier. There was more hair and whiskers on his head than is the common lot of men, and they had not been touched by shears for many weeks. This man was called Shag Sanders. His last name may or may not really have been Sanders, but there was no doubt about the appropriateness of his first name—he was beyond question shaggy, and convenience had shortened the appellation to "Shag."

Whatever and whoever else Shag Sanders may have been than what he claimed to be, there was never any doubt that he was the hardest-boiled trail boss that ever piloted a herd into Dodge City, and usually he picked his men to suit the business he was in. They were a rough, hard lot and had been garnered from the toughest ranches in the coastal plain. Gunfighters, all. Men who knew little of fear and who valued life—that is, the life of the other fellow—very little. Hard men, following a hard trade, for scant enough pay. Old Shag Sanders was absolute king of his outfit. His word was law, and he was a born pirate. The slender, pleasant-faced Frank Carleton, who sat his horse at the top of the bank waiting for Sanders, was the only man in the outfit who wasn't afraid of Old Man Shag, as they called him.

"Hallo, Frank!" roared Shag. "When did you get in?"

"Just rode up a few minutes ago."

"Huh! Yo' braunk looks like he's been rid some. Indians after you?"

"No. There was nothing after me. I was just trying to get to the herd before it crossed the Colorado."

"Why?"

"Well, Brown & Candley sent me on this trip to look out the route and report conditions."

"What's that got to do with the herd being across the Colarado?"

"It may have a good deal to do with it, if you'll listen to me."

"Go ahead, I'm listening."

"All right. This herd hasn't as much business trying to go across the Little River country and on up the Brazos as a preacher's got packing a poker deck."

"That's bad, 'cause it's goin' just that way," said old Shag.

" Hunting trouble, are you?"

" No, I ain't exactly huntin' any. Always been able to find enough without hunting. All the same, this is free country, and I aim to drive my herd where I damn' well please."

" I see. How come you start so early?"

" Grass was good and everything ready. Thought we'd start, take it slow so we wouldn't get north faster than good grass. That would give the herd a chance to grow some, in on Little River and the Brazos."

" Shag," said Carleton, " you're a good trail boss, but sometmies you get your head down and crowhop. You're doing that right now. I'm going to tell you a few things about that trail, and then I think you'll swing the herd west, as I suggested to Brown & Candley before I left."

" Go ahead and show your booger. If I'm skeered when you're through, I'll tell you."

" All right. In the first place, you have got over a thousand cattle from Old John Banks as you went through, the last two years, at a dollar a head and no questions asked. This trip you won't get any. Then——"

" Did you see Banks and hear him say that?"

" I saw him. I didn't hear him say what he was going to do."

" How do you know, then?"

" Banks is going to be watched so close he can't take a second helping of beans, let alone a second helping of cattle."

" That's his trouble. I can't be bothered about what happens to him. There's more people offering cheap cattle along that trail than him."

" Perhaps so, but listen, Shag. I'm trying to save you trouble. Trying to honestly earn the money Brown & Candley paid me for making that trip. If you go that way, you'll have more trouble than you've ever had on a trail drive in your life."

" What kind of trouble?" and there was truculence in Old Shag's tones.

" One trouble you'll have will be having your herd cut every mile, from Little River Valley to the head of the Brazos, and——"

" The hell I will! This makes five herds I've took up, and they ain't been cut by nobody yet. You been up with

me the last two trips, and you ain't saw nobody cut my herd, have you?"

"No, but if you undertake to cross the Little River Valley, I'll see it cut this time."

"Well, I'll be damned, Frank, you surprise me good and plenty. You been up with me twice, and I thought you was the gamest man in the layout. You stood up in that fight with the Cheyennes and worked yo' old cannon until the barrel was hed-hot. Now you got cold feet at a few farmers in the Brazos Valley saying they don't want a trail herd to come that way. John Banks is the biggest cowman in the Little River country, and he wants us to come through. He can understand that a trail boss don't want his herd chousted to hell and all. It pays him to understand," and Shag winked a red, bleary eye. "Of course, if you got cold feet, you can go on home, but the herd goes right on the way she's p'inted."

"Oh, I'll go anywhere you or any of your outfit will go," said Carleton, wtih a shrug. "I told Brown & Candley I'd make this trip, then when I got back I'd join the herd. Told 'em I'd report my findings to you, then go on up the trail with you. I aim to do that, unless you fire me. but——"

"But what?"

"Here's the way it lays, Shag. The first year I went up with you there were thousands of unbranded cattle, some five or six years old. They were nobody's cattle, and I cut plenty of 'em into the herd. Then last year there weren't any mavericks. Everything was branded, and I didn't cut anything into the herd. Sure, I knew plenty was cut in, but that was your business. I'm hired to drive cattle, and I——"

"Yes, I noticed last trip you wouldn't ride around a cow that was bawling its head off to get into the herd," sneered Shag. "Still, you're a good cowhand, and you're plumb helpful in a gun-fight. I ain't goin' to fire you for——"

"Just a minute, Shag. I'd as well get this thing clear. The reason I don't cut a branded cow into the herd is because I'm a cowman. I consider that a man's brand on a cowbrute ought to be just as sacred as the title to his land, and the time is not very far off when it will be so. What you and your other men do is your affair. I go on with the distinct understanding that I don't steal or help steal any cattle."

"Steal! Why, dammit, everybody picks up what they can. You just about called me a cow-thief, and they ain't many can do that and get away with it."

Carleton was sitting with both hands on his saddle horn, looking level-eyed at old Shag.

"All right, Shag," he drawled. "You heard what I said. If you want——"

"Aw, hell, Frank, you and me don't want to quarrel. You know dang well I wouldn't try to shoot nothin' out with you, unless you was asleep and had both hands tied. If you joined the church while you was upstate, that's yo' business. Go ahead and drive cows. I'll handle the business part of the drive. I'll take the responsibility for the route."

"Oh, you'll take that all right, for I have already written my report and mailed it to Brown & Candley from Austin."

"Well, now, see here, Frank. Since you been so damned careful to keep in the clear and to tell me just where she lays with you, I'll put some cards on the table. I'm rough, I reck'n, and I ain't very purty. They say dawgs howl and run under the house when they see me comin', but I know this trail drivin' job. If I didn't handle it the way I do, Brown & Candley wouldn't keep me five minutes. I'm goin' to put this herd through, and put it through my way, if it's the last herd I ever put through."

"All right, Shag. You're the ramrod. Just remember when it's over, if you are able to remember, that I am telling you now you'll never put this herd over the Brazos Valley and Little River trail the way you have put others over. You've got to be halfway——"

"Honest, I reck'n," sneered Shag, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "I don't want to drive it past to-night's bedding ground with a personal quarrel on with one of my men."

"Oh, you don't need to take it that way. I just been making my report to you and trying to show you where you're wrong. I'm through now. If there's ever a personal quarrel between us, you'll start it, and——"

"And you'll finish it," grinned Shag. "Well, I ain't denying you're one smooth little finisher. I just got one more thing to say. I know as well as you do that you've been confidential man for Brown & Candley all this time. Point is, it's hard enough to handle this gang of bullies 'thout having

one man in the outfit that says what he pleases to me when he pleases. I'd like to——"

"You won't have any trouble about that," interrupted Carleton. "I'm through. From here on I'm just a trail-hand, same as the others. My job is to drive cows when and where I'm told."

Old Shag Sanders turned his horse without another word and led off towards the trail camp, which was on Limekiln Creek, about a mile from the river crossing. A good deal was going on under Mr. Sanders' shaggy mane as he rode along. He had deeply resented some of the things Frank Carleton had said to him, but there were several reasons why he had not shown his resentment more openly. The chief of these, perhaps, was the fact that he had no taste for a gun-fight with this young man. Shag was no coward, by any manner of reckoning, but he was no fool. He'd never get pulled into shooting out a difficulty with that lad, whose hands had the swiftness of light and whose accuracy with a gun was positively uncanny.

Shag's hide was tough enough, in all conscience, but some of the remarks Carleton had made got under it. The trail boss held his job by virtue of his very toughness. Piloting a herd through hostile cow country, and later through hostile Indian country, was no milksop's employment. Men for this job were hard to find. Still the epithet of "rustler," or even "cow-thief," was not to be tolerated in his code of ethics, and, as he had said, Frank Carleton had come perilously near to calling him one.

All this was rankling in Shag's mind. He wished that he might have taken this young fellow at his own suggestion and fired him, but there was good reason against that. He had none too many men for the job in hand, and good men for the work were not easy to get. He knew Frank could be depended on in a pinch. Besides all that, he knew his employers would wonder why he fired the best man he had. They might even go so far as to wonder if it was because their trail boss didn't want to be watched too close at the delivery pens. So Shag trotted on to camp, turning these things out in his mind.

Carleton's mental processes were busy in an entirely different direction. He didn't care a bally whoop for old Shag Sanders or what he might think. Here were five thousand

steers that Brown & Candley had a more or less valid title to. By decent handling and by allowing people to cut the herd on request these could practically all be gotten to market. Old Shag had started up the trail two years before with five thousand cattle, and had delivered at the pens in Dodge City nine thousand. The year before, he had started with five thousand and had delivered seven thousand. True, many of these cattle had been bought cheap along the trail, but such purchases were little more than compounding a felony, for Shag had known they were stolen cattle by the low price he paid.

Carleton had said no word about overhearing the conversation between old Mont Jackson and John Banks. Shag would have scoffed at it if he had. Added to a queer list of accomplishments, some of which amounted almost to afflictions, Frank Carleton had a shrewd knowledge of men. He could go into a crowd of men and pick out the stayers as unerringly as he would pick the best horses in a corral. He had had the good opportunity to study Mont Jackson, and there was no shadow of doubt in his mind that Jackson would cut the next herd that crossed his range or give his life in the effort. There were too few men such as Mont Jackson in the world, he told himself, and he didn't want to take a hand in helping the old ranchman out of it. He had done his best to swing the herd west across a country where there were few ranches, but he had failed. Now he was going to let things take their course and watch old Shag pay the price for his folly.

Carleton was assigned to his usual place of pointer when the herd started the next day. Slowly the immense caravan of hoofs and horns moved on across the country, taking their time and travelling but a few miles each day. All along the trail there were men who would have a few cattle to sell at a low price. Gleanings from their neighbours' ranges, perhaps, but the trail boss was supposed to know nothing about that. The point with him was to give them time to get the stuff together, in some draw or thicket near the trail, where it would be easy to slip into the herd. He'd pay the money, and count the cattle without looking too closely at brands.

There was little opportunity for private conversation between Shag and Frank Carleton, and neither of them sought the little there was. So days passed, and only commonplaces

were discussed between them. Neither of them had any idea of the turn their next serious conversation would take, or where it would occur.

CHAPTER IV

CLEMMIE READS THE LAW

It may have occurred to you that Miss Clemmie Jackson was not an ordinary girl. She could hardly be ordinary, and yet be old Mont Jackson's daughter and as like him as two peas in a pod. Hers was a strong and forceful character. She might make the mistakes common to young persons, but, though mature judgment might be lacking, there was at least never any lack of courage.

It was an afternoon in early April. Clemmie was out in the yard at the Mary Jane ranch, transplanting flowers. Since the death of Curly, she had been very quiet. After the one outburst of grief, she had controlled her emotions. Like her father; she was never very demonstrative. Her life was one of studied repression. For that reason, when she did lose control, grief, rage, or joy was for the time a devouring flame. Old Cam Sneed and Lew Pafford were stilting about on high-heeled boots, hindering about as much as they helped, but putting their hearts into the work of digging up plants and digging other holes for them. The partners had been with a round-up outfit, east of the Brazos. They had reached home at noon, to find that Old Man Mont and the M J outfit, which was working somewhere to the west of the ranch, had not yet come in, so the two punchers were taking a half holiday and killing time by playing with flower-planting. Lew Pafford spent as much of his time as possible watching Clemmie, when she wasn't looking, and old Cam spent a like amount of his time watching Lew and wondering if the young fool had an idea Clemmie would ever give him a thought, except a some-one to fetch and carry for her.

They were in the midst of this interesting game when Mr. James Oglethorp Johnson—commonly called "Jim!-damn-yo'-black-hide-come-here"—rounded the corner of the dingy old ranch-house with a wheelbarrow of fresh dirt for

the flowers. Jim stopped, dropped his burden, mopped his shiny black face with a bandana, then stood staring down the Little River Valley.

"Jim, are you lookin' for weather signs or just restin'?" drawled old Cam, with one corner of an eye on Lew and Clemmie who were digging up a plant fifty feet away.

"Weather, Mr. Cam, and I sho' sees a reg'lar old rampagin', tree-twistin' bender a-comin'," grinned Jim, and he continued to stare down the valley.

"Oh, shut up, Jim, and come on with that dirt. Who ever heard of a storm coming from the south-east, and not a cloud in the sky?"

"Honest, Mr. Cam. Came over here an' look if you sees what I does."

Cam took the few steps necessary to bring him in line with the opening in the trees; then suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks, like a bird dog come to point. Far down the valley he could see thousands of cattle streaming down from the uplands and deploying in the open prairie. It was a month earlier than the earliest trail herd had ever come through, but there was no mistaking it.

"Good Lawd! Look at 'em keep a-comin', Mr. Cam," muttered Jim. "They'll thes' nacherly sweep the world, get the milk cows, and take the calves out'n the trap. An' Mars'r Mont not at home, too."

"Shut up, damn you!" snarled old Cam, but he was too late with his caution.

"Whatever are you two talking about?" asked Clemmie.

They hesitated. Jim's tongue had been glued to the roof of his mouth by old Cam Sneed's snarl. Sneed himself was casting about in his mind for a plausible lie to tell the girl. He didn't want her to see that herd. There had been too much talk about cutting trail herds, and he knew Clemmie had heard some of it. He stood contemplating the regal beauty of her, as she stood with a plant in her hand, her hat pushed back and her face flushed with the violent exercise of pulling at the plant while Lew did the digging.

Lew Pafford was leaning on the handle of a grubbing hoe, and there was no mistaking the worship in his eyes as he looked at Clemmie. In pulling at the shrub, their shoulders had touched more than once. There was a deep flush on Lew Pafford's tanned face. It may have been partly due to

exercise, but it was chiefly due to the vibrant, wonderful woman who stood near him and to whom Lew dared to lift his eyes, now that Curly was out of the reckoning. Bert Banks he feared not at all.

"Cat's got your tongue, Cam?" laughed Clemmie, as, with the plant in her hand, she glided to the old puncher's side.

"No, ma'am, not quite, but——"

"A trail herd!" cried Clemmie, dropping the plant. "What are they doing coming through so early?"

"I don't know, ma'am. It is right early, but grass riz sooner than usual this year."

"It's got to be cut," snapped Clemmie, "and there's only us three to cut it."

"I reck'n Lew and me had better ride down there and hold some sort of palaver with 'em," drawled Cam. "Some trail outfits is reasonable, and some ain't."

"Saddle a horse for me, too. I'm going."

"No, Miss Clemmie. Yo' pap wouldn't want——"

"Cam!" and there was everything wrong in Clemmie's tone. Then turning to Lew, she went on in a voice that every woman knows how to use for the purpose of gaining her wishes, "You'll saddle a horse for me, Lew?"

He would, and he did. Not only that, but he was ready to shoot any man to ribbons who would deny her anything.

As the partners strode away towards the corral to saddle the mounts, sane, level-headed old Cam Sneed didn't know whether to curse or pray. He felt pretty sure that neither would prevent disaster. Lew, whom he had always thought sane enough, had gone stark mad in an hour.

The trail herd had spread out in the valley and gone to grazing. It was the end of a day's travelling for them. The two wagons of the outfit had stopped on the bank of a stream a short distance from the herd and between it and the Mary Jane ranch-house. A few hundred yards back on the trail from the camp, the wrangler was holding the *remuda* in a little swale where the grass was exceptionally good. Old Shag Sanders and a dozen of his thirty men had just ridden up to camp, when they saw three riders approaching, so they sat their horses, waiting. As the three approached, Shag rode a few paces forward to meet them. Frank Carleton sat quietly on his horse with the others.

"What outfit is this?" asked Clemmie Jackson, without other greeting, as she came to a stop within twenty feet of the trail boss.

Old Cam had manœuvred to get on the side of Lew Pafford, next his gun hand.

"This is the trail herd of Brown & Candley, of the coast country, ma'am," informed old Shag. "Drivin' to Dodge City."

"Well, we've come to cut it," and there was flat ultimatum in Clemmie's tones. No request about it.

"Well, now, that brings on mo' talk," leered Shag. "Ordinarily I wouldn't deny a pretty woman anything she wanted, but I don't allow my herd cut by nobody."

That remark resulted in three things. Lew Pafford's hand crept towards his gun.

"Don't be any damnder fool than you can help, Lew," old Cam growled. "Keep yo' hand away from that gun until we got some sort of chance."

Lew's hand went back to his saddle-horn, but there was a white line on his lips, and his eyes were narrowed to slits. Another thing was that Frank Carleton's face went a shade darker with blood under the tan, and his horse moved two paces forward. The third and awful thing was the burst of Clemmie Jackson's anger.

"You haven't been letting people cut your herd, I know," and her voice was as cold and hard as that of Old Man Mont himself, as she sat there, unarmed, and looked old Shag in the eye. "None of you trail drivers have been allowing your herds to be cut. The reason is plain enough. There are things in them you don't want seen. An honest man don't object to his herd being cut," and there was biting scorn in Clemmie's tones, as she emphasized the word "honest."

"I reck'n I can't argy much with a woman," growled Shag, his dust-inflamed eyes glaring at the two men who stood silently by Clemmie. "If any of yo' menfolks want to take this thing up, I'd——"

"You'd cheerfully murder them," and her lips curled in scorn. "My father is not at home, and I'll do the talking in his stead. Let the three of us ride quietly through your herd and drive out any M J stuff we find. Then, when you start again, let us ride ahead of the herd and keep our cattle pushed back out of the way. Then, when you leave our range, you'll

know what it is to feel like an honest gentleman for once."

"I tell you," grated old Shag, "I don't allow nobody to cut my herd," and he ripped out a terrible oath. "That goes."

"And I tell you that this herd will be cut before it leaves the Mary Jane range," flared Clemmie, right back in his teeth.

"Now, see here, ma'm. Mostly I aim to respect any sort of woman, whether she's a lady or not, as long as she stays in her place. But you're entirely too damned free with yo' tongue. I just got this to say. Take yo' two little boys and get to hell away from my herd, for by——"

"That'll do, Shag!"

The little brown horse that Frank Carleton rode seemed to have made the distance from where it stood to old Shag's side in a single bound.

"What the hell——"

"I told you that would do," said Frank Carleton, in a low voice, "and it will, or I'll make it do." Then to Clemmie, "You say your father is away from home, Miss Jackson. This herd travels slowly, and he'll have all the way from here to Dodge City to cut it. You've made a fair proposition to Mr. Sanders, and he has refused it. All you can do is return home and wait until your father gets back. Then——"

"Who are you to be telling me what I should do?" stormed Clemmie, beside herself with rage. "If you were an honest man and a gentleman, you wouldn't be with this outfit."

Old Shag Sanders, who had been stricken dumb with surprise, grinned evilly at Clemmie's castigation of Carleton.

"That may be, Miss Jackson, but I try to be both honest and a gentleman. At least I would offer no affront to a lady, and I'm trying to help you. I ride point on this herd, and nothing of yours shall get into it on my side."

"The gent's offering fair, Clemmie," interposed old Cam Sneed. "We're outnumbered and outclassed. We can't do anything—now."

A moment later, Clemmie turned her horse and, consumed with rage, rode back towards the Mary Jane with Cam and Lew. They had gone a quarter of a mile when, glancing back out of the corner of his eye, old Cam saw two of the trailers ride out a hundred yards or so from the camp and stop.

When Clemmie and her companions had left the camp, Old Man Shag had turned to Carleton.

"Frank, I want to talk to you a minute," he said, and led the way from camp. These were the two men Cam had noticed. When they stopped, Shag went on, "You told me you wouldn't get rough with me before the other men."

"Yes, but I didn't tell you I'd stand by and see you insult a woman."

"Insult, hell! What did she do to me? The damned little——"

"That'll be enough of that. Say what you want to say to me, but keep your dirty tongue off other people."

"What I want to say to you is that no damned man on earth can pull the stuff you pulled on me and get away with it!"

"I ain't trying to get away," and there was a cool, dangerous smile on the younger man's lips. "If you aim to do anything, do it, and don't talk so much.

Shag was purple with rage. He had killed men a-plenty, in his time, and he was aching to do murder right now. Only fear of the deadly speed of Carleton held him in check.

"I—I can't keep a man on that pulls that kind of stuff," choked Shag. "I'm goin' to fire you."

"Oh, is that all you're going to do? Well. I've saved you the trouble. Money couldn't hire me to stay on with that outfit while you're boss. Before I go, I'll tell you a few things. Your herd is going to be cut, hell or no hell. I heard a man say that, and I know he meant it. I told you not to come this way. Now it's up to you. There's just one more thing. You want to kill me. I'm going to ride straight away from this outfit, and I want to see if you've got the nerve to shoot me in the back."

Without another word, Carleton turned and rode straight away from the camp, never looking back. Old Shag's hand dropped to his gun and halted there. A hundred yards away a group of his men stood watching him. They were rough, mostly thieves and killers themselves, but shooting a man in the back was strictly against their code of ethics, and old Shag knew it. He sat like a statue, his scarred soul seething within him, until Carleton was out of range; then, holstering his gun, he rode back to camp. In that moment, fear was born in old

Shag Sanders' soul. He didn't even know it at the time, but he was more afraid of Frank Carleton than he had ever been of anything or anybody in his wicked, eventful life.

Clemmie Jackson and the two cowboys had stopped near the corral gate and were sitting on their horses, talking.

"It's the greatest outrage I ever heard of," insisted Clemmie. "Not only refusing us the right to cut their herd, but insulting me for asking it!"

"Well, Clemmie," drawled Cam, "you weren't right gentle in makin' yo' demands."

"Mean to say she was wrong?" demanded Lew, in a tone that was unusual to him when addressing his old side partner.

"No, Lew," said Cam, wearily, "I don't mean anything like that. I just——"

"Well, if it hadn't been I was afraid Miss Clemmie would get hurt, I'd 'a' called old Whiskers good and plenty hard. If you'll side me, we'll go back down there and have it over."

"I've sided you some in a good many places, Lew," growled Cam, "but I don't do that, for several reasons. The main one is that Mont would be short-handed when it was over, and he's apt to need all the help he's got."

"I don't care a whoop what he says to or about me. It's the way he talked to Miss Clemmie that——"

"Yes, I know, Lew. May be you'll get a chance to square it some time—if you still want it."

The conversation had gotten thus far, and Lew was casting about in his mind for a reply in keeping with his feelings towards Clemmie, when they heard the patter of hoofs on the trail and, looking up, saw Frank Carleton approaching them. He stopped at a little distance, and removed his hat.

"Where is your father, Miss Jackson?" he asked.

"You heard me say a little while ago that he was not at home."

"Yes'm, but you didn't say where he was."

"I don't know why I should say," and Clemmie's blue eyes flashed with anger. "I don't know what right one of the riders with a crooked trail herd has to ask me questions, anyway. I'd think you'd be ashamed——"

Their eyes clashed and held. Clemmie's voice faltered to a stop and presently she dropped her eyes before something

she saw in those of the trail-driver. Old Cam took advantage of the break.

"Mr. Jackson is with his cow outfit somewhere on the head draws of Little River, in west of here, but I reck'n he'd be right hard to find," he said.

"Thank you, sir," and raising his hat, Carleton rode away on the trail that led to Paint Hill.

"Now what do you suppose that smooth rustler is after?" asked Lew.

"Oh, there's no tellin'. Trail drivers is right smart mixed. That young chap don't look and he ain't acted much like he was real crooked."

"Huh! Miss Clemmie called the turn on him when she said he wouldn't be with that outfit if he was honest," said Lew.

"Maybe not. Anyway, he don't need me to defend him none. Looks like he could take pretty good care of himself."

Clemmie said nothing. Since that one clashing look into the eyes of Frank Carleton she had been silent. She was not wondering whether she had done this stranger an injustice. She didn't know his name. She probably never would see him again. What she did know was that there was that in his brown eyes, when they met hers, of which to be afraid. A quelling something that bade her keep quiet and quit talking out of turn. She dismounted, handed her bridle to Lew, and walked off towards the house. Lew sat gazing after her as if enthralled. He started when Cam, after rolling a smoke and lighting it, spoke to him.

"Lew, it's about time you got yo' feet back on ground an' spit out that loco weed you been chawin'," Cam suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you can't make yo'self look no bigger to me by rufflin' up yo' feathers. I never thought a woman could make a steady feller like you that crazy in an hour."

"Keep her name out of yo' mouth!" snarled Lew.

"I ain't mentioned no name and ain't goin' to. When Old Man Mont hired you and me, he hired us to work cattle. I don't recollect anything in the articles about goin' crazy and fallin' in love. Seems to me our job is to look after Mont's interest an' not gum the deck any worse than what it's already gummed."

"I offered to go back to that herd with you and have it over with them fellers," said Lew sullenly.

"Yes, but you wasn't thinkin' about Mont Jackson's interests. You just wanted to kill that trail boss because he insulted Clemmie. In the first place, Clemmie didn't have as much business there as a granddaddy spider's got in the clabber. In the next place, you and me wouldn't last as long with that gang of killers as a paper collar would last in hell."

"What's your brave idea, then?"

"I ain't got but one right now, and that ain't about Mont and his cows. It's about my side-partner havin' somethin' bad the matter with him. For God's sake, Lew, buck up and be sane. I don't blame you for the way you feel. If I was thirty-forty years younger I might feel that way myself. But don't lose yo' head. Don't let it make you crazy. Don't let it make you kill me. I'm about the best friend you got, and—you might need me some time."

Lew's hand went out to his old side partner.

"You're right, Cam," he said, shamefacedly. "I been a right smart fool the last hour or two. I don't think I'll get plumb well of it real quick, but I won't try to take no more of it out on you."

"Fine. That's settled. Now, what the hell are we goin' to do about trail herd? Old Man Mont ought to know about it, but he's scattered to hell and back, and it might take a week to find him."

"No. We ain't got no business in Paint Hill. Bert Banks hangs out there most of the time, and you an' Bert ain't got no business meetin' anyways soon."

Lew's face flushed at the shrewd guess of old Cam, who knew Lew was aching for a showdown with the young ranchman, and had been ever since Curly's death.

"Let's ride into Paint Hill. There's always fellows coming and going there. We might find out just where he is."

"I got an idea," continued Cam, "that the Mary Jane outfit is just about on the head of Panther Creek by this time. We'll just ride out of here as soon as we eat something and tell Old Man Mont the news."

Back in his place, with old Cam leading, Lew was himself again, but it would be a long time before that hope that had grown and blossomed in an hour would die—if it ever did.

CHAPTER V

WHAT'S WRONG WITH LITTLE RIVER?

ON that April evening at sunset the Little River Valley was one of the most peaceful and pastorally beautiful spots on the great unfenced domain of Texas. It was a fertile land that had been singularly free from strife. None of the battles and skirmishes that had won the independence of an empire had dyed the sod with crimson stains. The floor of that valley was covered with a carpet of green, on which were traced wonderful flowers, wrought in matchless beauty by the hand of nature. When the sun sank to rest and the soft purple curtain of night fell, it marked the shifting of scenes between a revel of fairies and an orgy of dragons—between peace and relentless war.

Just at nightfall, old Shag Sanders and one of his men rode away from the trail camp. The J Bar B ranch was about fifteen miles away and slightly north of east. Shag was heading for it. He had not intended to seek John Banks until he had not intended to seek John Banks until he had made another day's drive and was on the J Bar B range, but the incident of the afternoon had changed his plans. Among the last words of Frank Carleton had been the statement that he had heard a man say he was going to cut Shag's herd "hell or no hell." He wanted to kill Carleton and would do it if opportunity presented, but that didn't keep him from believing in the young man's shrewdness.

There was no doubt in the mind of the trail boss that somebody was going to try to cut his herd. He wanted to know who that somebody was, and he hoped John Banks could give him the information. As he rode along, another matter was nagging at his mind. Where had Frank Carleton gone? He had taken the trail towards Paint Hill. Any other man in his outfit, if fired, would have ridden to the nearest town, got drunk, lost the little money he had, and come cringing back to him a day or two later, begging for his old job. Carleton might do that, but Shag doubted it.

Old John Banks was sitting in the little office, built apart and half-way between the ranch-house and the bunk-shack. Bert was with him and together they were talking in low tones.

"If Old Man Shag was here now, while the Mary Jane outfit is away from home, we could easy put in two thousand," said Bert.

"Yes," snapped Old John, "and my old blind aunt could have easy been my uncle if she'd been built a little different. We can't do business on ifs. We got two thousand cattle in sight, and we got to manage to keep 'em in sight until the herd comes through. That's your job. I'll look after the business end of it."

"Yes, and I'll look after my end, if you'll let me alone," snarled Bert. "You raised unshirted hell with me about killin' that Curly fellow. If we aim to get the cattle, we'll have to keep some people out of the way."

"Oh, shut up, Bert. You killed that boy because you thought Clemmie Jackson liked him. I don't blame you for not wanting your woman prowlin' around with other fellows, but you got to be careful. Old Mont Jackson is hard to rile, but get him started once and hell can't hold him."

"We'd all be better off if he was out of the way, too."

"Yes, maybe so," drawled Banks, "but you don't want the job of putting Mont Jackson out of the way. Don't lose yo' head, boy. Don't get the idea that because you know a few fancy tricks with a gun you know 'em all. I know Mont Jackson from fetlocks to foretop. He's the worst man in a gun-fight that was ever in the Little River country. And if you start anything with him he'll kill you. Not only that, but he'll do it so damned sudden that you won't know it until you hear clods fallin' on yo' coffin."

"That's right sudden," said Bert, with a sneering grin. "I allers thought you was afraid of old Monty. He might have been bad once, but he's an old cap-and-ball has-been. That's what he is now."

"All right, have it yo' way, but don't say I didn't tell you. The point is that they's no use in messing with sleepin' dogs, as the feller said. Old Mont don't suspect that we're helping Shag to a lot of M J stuff, and there's no use in making a fool break and letting him find it out. He's—hallo, Shag, come in! Talk of the devil, and you'll see some of his folks. Talkin' about you just a minute ago."

"All right," growled Shag, "you can talk to me, now. There's some things I want to know."

"Where yo' herd?"

"Little River Valley."

"Ridin' pretty far ahead of 'em, ain't you?"

"Yep, getting the range stuff out of the way," grinned Sanders. "That, and getting a little information."

"All right, I got the information for you in one little mouthful. Get that herd on the jump at daylight and keep it moving. By the time it passes out of my range, I'll put two thousand where you can pick 'em up. One thousand of them is J Bar B's and the other thousand is—cattle I got cheap and will sell right."

"That sounds good, as far as it geos, but——"

"Don't do it! You might hurt your head," laughed Banks, who posed as quite a wit.

"Yes," snapped Shag, "and I may bust hell out of it anyway. Point is—what the hell's the matter with this Little River country, anyway?"

"Nothing! It's the best cow country in Texas, and has got the best cowmen."

"Yes, I reck'n so. What I want to know is when they began to cut trail herds, 'hell or no hell'?"

Old John Banks started violently at those words. He hadn't thought of them since he heard Mont Jackson utter them that snowy day in the Bronco saloon. They came back to him now with smashing force.

"I see you've heard about it," and there was a cold glitter in Shag's eyes. "What the hell you mean by letting me drive my herd into a trap? You in on this 'hell or no hell' business?"

"Now, see here, Shag, they's no use to get raw with me," Banks protested. "You and me been workin' together for two-three year. If I was in on a move to cut yo' herd, I wouldn't be throwing stuff into it, would I?"

"I don't know. What I get from you I take as it lays. If somebody takes it away from me afterwards, you're in the clear. I want some kind of guarantee that I'm going to hold the stuff I buy."

"Why, Shag, you don't let nobody cut yo' herd."

"I ain't been letting 'em, and I don't aim to, but all the same, if I'm going to take in the stuff I been picking up along the trail, the fellow I pay money has got to help see that my herd ain't cut, 'stead of standing with the farmers, and—who started this 'hell or no hell' business, anyway?"

"I can tell you who I heard say it. It was old Mont Jackson."

"Who's he?"

"Mont Jackson? Why, everybody knows who Mont Jackson is. He's got a big lot of land on Little River, and did have a lot of cattle, but—he's been havin' kinder hard luck the last few years, and he's sorter got a grouch."

"Does he run the M J bared?"

"Yes."

"I see. I understand, too, why his cows ain't done so well. Has he got a daughter that's pretty as a paint pony and got a tongue like the little end of a stingin' scorpion?"

"Never mind about the girl. Leave her out of it," growled Bert.

"Leave her out, hell! She came down to my camp this afternoon and read the law to me. That's how I find out about this cuttin' business. She says my herd'll never leave the M J range 'thout bein' cut. I sends her and her two punchers back home, but I lose a good rider in the deal. Before he leaves he tells me he heard a man say he'd cut the first trail herd that come through his range, hell or no hell. That's a heap of cuttin', and——"

"Who's this hand you lose?" interrupted Bert.

"Frank Carleton is his name. Seems like he kinder liked the lady. He butts into the talk some, and, when she's gone, I fired him."

"Where'd he go?"

"Why he rides after the girl and the other two fellows, but I reck'n he's in Paint Hill and prob'ly drunk by this time."

"Sorter fellow is he?"

"Good cowhand and swift with a gun."

Bert ceased his questioning.

"What I want to find out is will this Mont Jackson do what he says he'll do?" old Shag went on.

"Why—why—he'll try to——"

"Oh, he'll try! I seen fellers get beat damn' nigh to death by some feller tryin' to lick 'em. These tryers is apt to be right bad. You just as well come clean, Banks. You can't hold out on me. You don't want my herd cut, but you don't want to tangle with this Mont Jackson. Why?"

"Well—well—our ranches joins. We've always been neighbours and got along, and we——"

"An' as long as he don't get wise to you you've got a good thing," finished Shag. "Well, that's yo' business. His daughter said he was away from home. I'm goin' to move my herd on to yo' range as soon as it's light in the morning, and you'll put yo' stuff in right then or you won't put it in at all. After it's in, you'll help me with this 'hell or no hell' stuff, because if Jackson do cut the herd, and he won't if I'm alive, you'll pick up a little neighbourhood, pocket edition of hell for yo'self. That's how she lays. Take it or leave it."

"Why, Shag, I'll tell you. If it was six months from now, I'd have Mont where I could tell him what to do. He's just had his notes extended. He won't be able to take care of 'em when the time comes, and he——"

"You're a smart man if you know what'll take place fifteen minutes from now, let alone six months. If this Mont Jackson comes on that cuttin' trip, and comes fixed, I could just talk rough a little and let him cut, if I was alone. If I had you backin' me, on yo' own range, it would be a whole lot different."

"All right, Shag. Have it your way. You're seeing boogers, but I'll agree. Put your herd on my range, and I'll back you."

Banks was relying on the fact that if Mont Jackson was going to cut that herd at all, he'd cut it on his own range.

"Now, see here, Pap. The showdown's come in this mess," Bert said, when old Shag had gone. "You know old Mont Jackson is goin' to cut that herd—if he's half as bad as you say he is. The only shot we got is to throw in with Sanders. If it's got to come to a gun-fight, let it come. When it's over we can say we was just helpin' Shag's herd across our range and got caught in the mess while we was lookin' after our own interests—which would be true."

"Oh, you're too anxious to get mixed up in a row with the M J outfit. Who else do you want to kill? If Shag moves his herd prompt, like he ought to, he'll be clean out of this section before the M J outfit gets back. Old Mont ain't got a strong enough gang to foller him, and he'll give it up. If he does follow and find a lot of cattle, it'll be between him and Shag, and we'll be in the clear. Then when six months rolls around, I'll have Mont where I want him and can make him crawl. He'll be ready to forget that high and mighty

way of his'n, and Clemmie'll come down a peg along with him."

"It'll be time," snarled Bert. "I ain't seen her since that mess at Paint Hill. Guess we'll have a row when I do see her."

"The course of true love never did run like a spring buggy in wet sand," quoted old John, with an inane cackle.

With an oath, Bert clumped out of the office and went off towards the bunk-shack.

Old Shag Sanders took his way back across the open country to the trail camp. He had nothing to say to the man who rode with him. He had heard rumours of a coalition of the Brazos Valley ranchmen. Banks had told him that Mont Jackson had tried to get the other cowmen of the Little River country and the Brazos Valley to join him in cutting trail herds and they had refused. That was the thing he had been afraid of. No one outfit had any terrors for him. No one ranch had more than thirty men. If they had fifty they could do nothing in a gun-fight with his thirty killers. His mind was more at rest. There might be a fight with the M J, but it was not likely. If it came he would teach them a lesson that cowmen along that trail wouldn't forget soon.

He rode steadily on, pondering as he went. Stars were shining overhead, and the sky was cloudless, but far back to the north-west there was a low bank, fretted from time to time with streaks of lightning.

Back in the broken country west of Paint Hill, three other riders were looking at the same low cloud bank from time to time and urging their tired mounts on. Two of these were old Cam Sneed and Lew Pafford, riding together, and breaking long silences by stopping from time to time to discuss the probable whereabouts of the M J cow-camp. The other lone rider seemed to know every inch of the country and to be travelling by instinct. The little, wiry brown horse he rode kept on tirelessly, guided by the pressure of its rider's knees.

Old Mont Jackson was sitting on a bed-roll, by a flickering camp-fire. Half a mile away, the first shift of the night-watch were riding around the herd, crooning low songs to them, but glancing apprehensively from time to time at the rising cloud, and its forked lightning. Old Mont hoped to get considerable money to apply on the accrued interest on his notes, and a little on the principal out of that herd. With

those steers were a couple of hundred J Bar B's and several hundred stock cattle that they were working back to the home range in the Little River Valley, where a watch could be kept on them. Old Mont was still doing the right thing, still keeping to the ethics of the cow country. He was taking his neighbour's stuff back to him, the same as he expected that neighbour to do by him. There had been a question in his mind about John Banks, since that day at the Bronco, but that didn't change him.

To-night he was uneasy. All the men, except those on night herd, were asleep, but the boss of the outfit sat staring into the fire. He had noticed that cloud bank early in the evening. He knew what a thunderstorm would mean, with a lot of cattle fresh from the range and restless. They'd run. Some would be killed, and others would make a poor showing when he offered them to the first half-way honest trail-driver that came through. There'd be little sleep for old Mont that night. Too much was at stake. He was pondering these things when he heard the dragging footfalls of a tired horse approaching the camp.

"Is this the M J outfit?" asked a voice from outside the circle of firelight.

"Yes," replied Mont, "unsaddle and hobble yo' bronc."

"I'll just let him graze with the saddle on a while," the rider said, approaching the camp-fire. "Are you Mr. Jackson?"

"Yes, that's my name."

"Carleton's mine," and Frank extended his hand. "Would you walk a little way from camp with me? I have a message for you."

Mont Jackson threw a handful of dry grass and leaves on the fire, and it blazed brightly, lighting up the visitor's face.

"Seen you before, haven't I? Where was it?"

"In the Bronco Saloon, at Paint Hill, the day Curly was killed."

"Shore! I recollect you now. Did you know Curly?"

"No, sir, but I know something that you ought to know without delay."

"Huh! Want something to eat?"

"Yes, but that can wait. What I have to tell you can't."

"Oh, it's sudden stuff, is it?"

"Yes, sir, sudden and important."

"All right."

Having held back until he was satisfied that his visitor was all right, Jackson rose and led the way far out to the edge of the circle of light from the camp-fire. Not a man stirred in his blankets, and the snoring of the cook on the ground under the wagon could be heard plainly.

"Go ahead," the ranchman said, when they had squatted on their heels.

"I heard you say, that day at the Bronco, you aimed to cut the next trail herd that crossed your range."

"Yes. What of it?"

"There's one crossing it."

"What! This early? Whose herd is it?"

"Brown & Candley's. Do you know them?"

"No!" snapped old Mont. "I know their outfit, and I know their trail boss, old Shag Sanders, is a damned thief. Where is this herd?"

"Bedded about a mile and a half below your house, in the Little River Valley."

"How do you know so much about it?" and there was a note of suspicion in Mont's tones.

"I came up the trail with 'em."

"Thought you said you was in the Bronco when Bert Banks killed Curly?"

"I was," and Frank went on to tell just where he had been and what he had done since that day. He told of his refusal to maverick any more cattle. He admitted that he was a confidential man for Brown & Candley.

"That doesn't sound very reasonable to me," old Mont said, when he stopped. "Why would you warn me, if you're what you say you are? What do you get out of this?"

"Something happened at the camp this afternoon that I haven't told you about." Carleton had expected doubt, and he had held some things back to clinch his story.

"I hope to get the five thousand steers that honestly belong to Brown & Candley safely to Dodge City, for one thing," he went on. "For another, I hope to strike a blow against cattle stealing, with your help, that will make conditions decent for an honest man."

"Young man," said Mont Jackson, slowly, "your story, coming from one of Brown & Candley's men, is hard

to swallow. If I was convinced that it was straight, I'd be in that herd as soon as I could ride there, and I'd cut it, just like I said, hell or no hell. The trouble is—what assurance have I——"

"None, except my word, unless you can tell from what I say that I'm square, just as I can tell from what you say that you're square. If it would help any, I might tell you that, like yourself, I wouldn't knowingly beat you out of one penny, and I wouldn't let anybody else beat you if I could prevent it."

Then Frank sprang one of his clinchers, which was in regard to certain ranchmen along the trail selling stolen cattle to old Shag, and making it plain that John Banks was one of them.

"You'll have to show me that," old Mont declared. "I believe, now, you're on the level, but you're mistaken about John Banks. I've known him too long. He's been wrong some way lately, and I can't figure it out, but he ain't a rustler. He can't be, dammit. I believe the trail herd's there, and I'm ready and rearin' to go cut it, just as soon as I can work my herd down there, but—— "and Mont hesitated, "I don't aim for you to go back, and——"

"The only way I'll go back will be with you. I'm going to help you cut that herd!"

"Help me!"

"Yes, and when it's cut I'm going to keep it cut until it reaches Dodge City."

"How'd you happen to quit the outfit and come out here? How'd you know where I was?"

Frank had been waiting for that question, and he answered it by telling old Mont Jackson of Clemmie's visit to the trail camp and just what happened there. It was the last thing he held in reserve, and he didn't need any more. It was as if he had thrown a match into a powder barrel. Mont Jackson sprang to his feet and let out a frightful oath. True to his nature, when he did flame he was a holocaust, frantic with rage and ready to go at once. At that moment there was heard the sound of hoofs, and Cam and Lew rode into the circle of light.

CHAPTER VI

HELL OR NO HELL

WITH Carleton's story corroborated by his two trusted punchers, old Mont was not only convinced, but he was crazy to go.

"Mr. Jackson, this gent that brought you them tidings ahead of us is one of the trail outfit hisself," Lew Pafford said, after their story was told.

"Yes," snapped old Mont, "I know it, and the tidings he brought was good. You fellers better eat something, then try to get some sleep. We'll ride early and hard."

"Lew," said old Cam, a few minutes later, as the partners sat a little apart, eating cold meat and beans and drinking coffee, "if you don't quit fannin' the hammer on yo' mouth, you'll be plumb out of talk sometime when you need it."

There was still no hint of daylight when old Cam Sneed went from one slicker to another, waking the men. A lanky puncher when roused sat up on his blankets and cursed roundly, as cold drops of rain bit through his shirt.

"Come out of it," growled Cam. "We're goin' to move."

"Where we goin'?"

"To fight hell a few rounds."

"Huh! We won't have no trouble keepin' our sacks wet if it stays like this."

In a few minutes twenty men were gathered around the camp-fire, eating food that the grumbling cook had begun to prepare soon after midnight. Every one of them knew the story, and none of them offered any comment.

"Fellers, I don't generally talk much, and I don't aim to now," Mont Jackson addressed them, as they began to roll smokes. "There's a trail herd bedded right in front of my house. I reck'n you've heard me say I'd cut the next herd that crossed my range. I ain't changed my mind none. You fellows hired to me to punch cattle. This is goin' to be rough. If they's anybody wants out of it, now's the time to talk, 'cause there won't be no place to get out after it starts."

Not a man spoke. The hissing of big drops of rain in the camp-fire and the simmering of the old, black coffee pot was the only sound.

"Seems like God's still makin' men," and there was a tightness in old Mont's throat. "They's thirty thieves and killers with that outfit. We've got twenty here and six more with the herd. I'll vouch for them, for I've done talked to 'em. My men ain't killers, and they mostly ain't fancy gun-slingers, but I'll put 'em ag'in' the world as the best stayers that ever stretched a stirrup strap. My mother used to tell me, and I guess yo'n told you, that God was always on the side of justice. I reck'n twenty-six ag'in' thirty, with the Good Lord to leg for the short-handed outfit is mighty nigh an even break. Saddle yo' best broncos, for there's no tellin' when you'll have a chance to change The *remuda* and the wagon will hit the shortest trail for home as soon as it's light."

With the first dim light of morning two thousand cattle, strung out in a long, thin stream and hurrying away from the keen wind that had sprung up from the north, began to move towards the M J range. It was ten miles to the trail that led from Paint Hill to the Mary Jane.

"As soon as we get the herd across that trail we'll turn 'em wild loose and go about our business," instructed old Mont.

Frank Carleton, without asking where he should ride, had gone to the point, on the left side. The head of the herd had just crossed the Paint Hill trail, about half-way between that place and the Mary Jane, when Frank saw a movement in a thicket. An instant later a horseman dashed out the other side of the thicket and galloped away through the open. Carleton was after him like a flash. The man was a hundred yards ahead, with Carleton gaining, when he turned in his saddle and opened fire. Carleton's old bone-handled gun flashed out and up. The fleeing man had fired twice. Carleton fired once, and the man pitched headlong to the ground.

The herd was turned loose, and the M J men came thundering up just as Carleton dismounted. The reins were not tied together, and, having dropped on the ground, the riderless horse stopped.

"J Bar B horse," said Cam Sneed.

"What's this, Carleton?" demanded old Mont.

"Don't know, sir. He took a couple of shots at me, and I took one at him."

At that moment the man on the ground sat up and with

a grimmace of pain put his hand to his right hip. It was the same J Bar B puncher who had been playing pitch with Curly a few minutes before the boy was killed.

"Why, hallo, Parker! What are you doin' takin' a shot at one of my men?"

"Why, he—he ain't one of yo' men. He's a fellow that's wanted up in Dallas country for——"

"For what?" demanded Mont.

"Why—why, for a lot of things."

"And you was after him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you get him?"

"Why—I seen he was with y'all's outfit, an'——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Jackson, but we're losing a lot of time," interposed Carleton. "I'm the one this fellow was after, and he's my prisoner. Let me ask him a few questions."

"Go ahead."

"You hid in that thicket to get someone on the trail. Who was it?"

Parker made no reply.

"Who sent you to do this job?"

Parker still held his tongue, while the M J men sat scowling on their horses. They had not forgotten that Parker was the last man to talk to Curly before Bert Banks killed him, and Parker could see vengeance in their eyes.

"Here's a good rope," grated Cam Sneed. "He was after somebody in our outfit. It don't make no difference who it was, it's a hanging offence," and he uncoiled the lariat from his saddle.

"No," said Carleton, "it'll only take one cartridge, and——"

"I'll talk, fellers," pleaded Parker.

"All right. Talk fast. We're in a hurry. Who sent you over here, and who was you to kill?"

"Why, Bert, he sent me to Paint Hill, to—to get you."

"Oh, he did? What did he want with me?"

"Why, why, he wanted you out of the way."

"Nice of him," and a grim smile curled Frank's lips. "Nice of you to do the job for him, too. Why didn't Bert do it himself?"

"He's busy."

"Yes? Well, this is going to be the busiest day of Bert's young life. How many cattle are old John Banks and Bert going to deliver to Shag Sanders this morning? Out with it. I don't care anything about your shooting at me, but if you don't tell the truth about the cattle you hang."

"Well—they—er—Bert'll get me if I do tell."

"You'll have to take a chance on that. You're already got if you don't tell."

"Well, they're a thousand J Bar B's and a thousand mixed, mostly—mostly M J's."

Old Mont Jackson jumped as if he had been stung.

"Mean to say John Banks is selling my cattle to Shag Sanders!" he roared.

"Yes, and, now I've told, gimme my bronco and let me get out of the country, 'cause Bert'll get me when——"

"No," said Carleton, "you don't get your horse. You're just nicked a little on the funny-bone at the point of your hip. It's three miles to Paint Hill, and you can walk that——"

"No!" came a chorus of voices. "Take him along. Then, if he's lied, we'll hang him."

So Parker left the spot on his own horse, but unarmed and riding in the midst of the cavalcade that now swept across the country towards the J Bar B. This was what Carleton had proposed from the first, but old Mont had demurred until Parker had satisfied him on the point of Banks being a thief. Now he was ready to go after his cattle and, as he said, "take them anywhere he found them."

The threatened rain had turned into a slight norther, and now the clouds were breaking away and the sun coming out. Reaching a bit of rising ground, the party halted, and Carleton, who now rode with Old Man Mont, pointed across the prairie to a familiar sight. A large herd was being loosely held in a great flat. At a little distance was a smaller herd. Through wings formed by horsemen, with an opening in the centre, cattle dribbled in twos and threes, passing out and going on to the big herd, like drops poured from a small container into a large one. Two men sat their horses, counting the trickling stream of cattle.

"What do you make of that?" asked Carleton.

"It's a cattle delivery, all right, and I aim to see what cattle it is."

"Yes, and fight the trail outfit and the J Bar B outfit both."

"I don't give a damn if it's every outfit in Texas; I'm goin' to cut that herd," and old Mont's jaws snapped together.

"Well, let's take all the advantage we can," counselled Frank. "We can get into that draw and follow it up to within three hundred yards of where they're counting cattle, then rush 'em."

So it happened that John Banks and Shag heard a thunder of hoofs behind them, as they sat counting cattle, and turned their heads to see old Mont Jackson and Frank Carleton in the lead of twenty-six riders, bearing down on them in open formation. A dozen M J steers were in plain view, trotting on towards the big herd.

"What the hell do you want?" thundered Shag, as the horsemen drew to a halt.

"We're goin' to cut this herd," said old Mont, and there were open graves in the graveyard of his face.

"Like hell you are!" yelled Shag. "What are you goin' to cut it with?"

"Here's my cutter," replied Mont, and jerked his gun.

Men were hurrying to the scene from every direction.

"Don't let 'em bunch! Get 'em as they come!" yelled Carleton.

That voice brought old Shag alive. His gun sprang from the holster, and he fired the first shot, striking Mont Jackson in the fleshy part of the leg. At the same instant a horse flashed by Mont, and its rider opened on old Shag at close range. By this time firing was general.

There were twelve men around the trail herd, holding it. At the first shot, the herd started running back towards the M J range. True to their craft, and thinking it was just a little gun argument between Old Man Shag and Banks, these twelve tore away after the cattle. That left old Shag and Banks with about an even number of men against the Mary Jane outfit, but something had occurred that no one had foreseen. A duel to the death had been fought in the midst of the battle. The man who had dashed at old Shag at the opening of the fight was Lew Pafford. He had coolly and calmly shot it out with the brutal trail boss.

When their guns were empty, the trailers and Banks' men drew back out of range to reload, while the Mary Jane outfit held the ground and reloaded where they stood. Scattered about the prairie, dead, or mortally hurt, lay twelve men. Of these seven belonged to the trail outfit, three to the M J, and two to the J Bar B. A dozen others were slightly wounded. On the spot where the fight started, lay Lew Pafford, quite dead, and old Shag Sanders, who would pay the supreme penalty for his insult to Clemmie Jackson in a few minutes. He was still alive, and called for Frank Carleton.

"You pay in hard money, damn you," he grated, as Frank knelt beside him.

"You're the one that has paid for not listening to reason," replied Carleton.

"Oh, damn you' I told-you-so. I guess you'll take the herd on, now. I didn't give Banks no order for the money. If he shows one—and bein' a thief, he's apt to—it's a forgery. These is the first cattle we picked up. Them five thousand is honest stuff. You can let these damned farmers cut 'em all you want to. I hope the Cheyennes get you this trip, damn you."

With blood gushing from a severed artery and with half a dozen bullets in his body, ten minutes later Old Shag Sanders was dead. His death marked the beginning of the passing of that type of trail boss. It also marked the beginning of the Little River cattle war—and some other things.

Old John Banks had been so completely dumb-founded by the appearance of Mont Jackson, whom he had supposed to be far to the west with his cow outfit, and so terrorized at old Mont's face, that he had never fired a shot, nor had he been touched, notwithstanding he had been in the very thick of the fight. Banks and his son sat their horses with the remnant of the trail drivers and of their own men. Bert was not hurt, either. There was no mystery about it. He had been out of range when the fight started and had stayed out.

After old Shag lay back on the ground, dead, Mont Jackson and Carleton mounted their horses and were standing with the M J men gathered about them, when old John Banks and Bert rode out from their party and approached.

"Mont," called Banks, when he halted within fifty feet of them. "They ain't no use in any more gunplay over this mess. You and me can settle it peaceable."

"I didn't start it," said Jackson calmly.

"Neither did I. Shag's the one, damn him. I——"

"Shag's dead."

"Oh, he is. Well, you and me can settle it, then. All we got to do is——"

"I'll settle it my way. You just ride back to yo' outfit and tell 'em to put up their guns. We're comin' to talk, and if they start anything we'll finish it."

Then old Mont turned his attention to the trail drivers, and soon resored order to what threatened to become a stampede.

"Round up that herd," he ordered. "I want my cattle that's in it. I want 'em peaceable if I can get 'em that way, but I want 'em."

"We don't belong to this J Bar B outfit," said one of the trail drivers, sullenly.

"No, but you'll take orders from me," curtly replied Carleton.

An hour later the M J cattle were all cut out of the little herd, and on their way to their home range. The trailers had been instructed to go and catch up with the trail herd, except six that were to take care of their dead and wounded. Old Mont and John Banks, Carleton and Bert sat on their horses talking.

"Now, then, John," said Mont Jackson, "you told me this herd-cuttin' was unwritten law. All right. I'd as soon enforce an unwritten law as a written one—if it's good. I told you I'd cut that herd, and I'm going to cut it. Now about you and me. We're through. I laid off'n you to-day for old times' sake. If I ever ketch you drivin' a M J again I'm going to kill you. That goes for you, too, Bert."

"Why, Mont——" began old John Banks.

"No argument. I'll have all the J Bar B stuff cut out of the trail herd and thrown back on yo' range. I brought in two hundred of yo' steers from the west, and I'll have them thrown on yo' range. After that I'm done with you. Ride, now, both of you. I won't trust you behind my back."

Clemmie Jackson had spent a restless night there in the grim old ranch-house with her mother and no one else about the place but Jim, the negro cook. She slept fitfully and woke early, expecting her father and the men would come storming in at any moment and go at once to cut the trail herd as soon

as it was light. A few drops of rain fell at the ranch, and then the wind shifted to the north. Daylight came, followed by sunrise, and still the M J outfit hadn't made its appearance. She thought of the trail herd and walked to the spot where she had stood the day before when she first saw it. Not an animal was in sight. Surely her father and the men would be in soon and follow that trail herd.

She didn't know why, but since she had looked into that strange rider's eyes she had felt subdued. She had no desire to ride out on the range and order things as she would. In Carleton's eyes there had been a strange combination of rebuke, of caution, and of actual command. She had wanted to resent it, but couldn't. The words had refused to come.

Clemmie was in no way different from any other young woman who has never known the one great passion and in her ignorance supposes there is a substitute for it. Lying dormant in her being was the character of a wonderful woman, but as yet it had never been aroused beyond the peevish fretfulness of disturbed slumber. Curly she had loved as a young brother, chiefly because he was a good-natured boy and did her bidding without question, thus paying a tribute to her selfishness. She had been grieved deeply by his death. Not as a woman who loves a man and loses him, but as a sister who has been bereaved of a brother.

Bert Banks had been thrown at her head every day since she could remember. There had never been a definite engagement between them, but it was tacitly understood that she would marry him when she got ready—if she ever got ready. As to poor Lew Pafford, she had never given him a thought more than she gave her saddle pony, and yet, unknown to her, he had given his life to avenge an insult to her. She was the prettiest woman in the Little River country, but few men had come a-wooing. This piqued her the more, because she knew it was due to the understanding that she and Bert Banks were pledged to each other.

While all these things were true, and she knew them to be true, she was thinking of none of them this morning, nor did she think of them that day. Towards noon she saw the wrangler throw the *remuda* into the horse-trap. She saw the chuck wagon stop under some big trees between the house and the corrals. She saw the camp cook turn his team loose and go about preparing dinner, just as if he were out on the range.

Then she went out to the camp. The wrangler was sitting on a bed-roll, plaiting up a frazzled quirt, and the cook was making bread in an immense quantity. When she questioned them, they said they didn't know where the men were. That old Mont had sent them home, and that everybody had gone with the herd, only they ddin't know where the herd had gone.

"Guess they'll come rompin' in here pretty soon for chuck," the cook ventured. "Yes'n, Mr. Cam and Mr. Lew et breakfast at the cow-camp. Don't know when they got in, but they was there this mornin'. They was another strange gentleman et there, too."

The cook was mistaken. No one came romping in for anything at the noon hour. With the little information she had gleaned Clemmie went back to the house. She went again to the spot in the yard where she had first seen old Shag Sanders and his herd, and glanced down the valley which lay before her like a map. There was plenty to be seen now! Five thousand cattle in a mad stampede were storming across the country, headed directly for the Mary Jane, while a dozen riders, of wonderful skill, were trying to turn them into a mill. Slowly but steadily she saw the head of the mad torrent of hoofs and horns bend away from its course and gradually come round to the trail of the serpent. The thunder of the hoofs died out, and there was the trail herd, back on the grounds where it had bedded the night before.

The scene seemed to have a fascination for her. Perhaps she knew, subconsciously, that some new thing was coming out of it all, for herself and for the Little River country. At any rate, she went on watching. She saw the chuck wagon come back to the same old trail camp. Then she saw another herd driven out into the valley and stopped. All the men then rode to the trail herd. They were too far away to recognize, except that she could make out the tall form of her father, who seemed sitting quietly on his horse while the others cut the big herd. Then she laughed to herself. She had made such a great matter of cutting that herd, and it was nothing after all. Relieved, she went back and sat on the gallery.

From time to time men rode in on spent horses, changed mounts, and galloped away, most of them with a piece of meat and bread in their hands, eating as they rode. Still she didn't trouble to ask questions. She had seen busy days before,

when the men didn't take time to eat. It was nothing, after all. From where she sat on the end of the long gallery she could see the whole performance. There were no moving pictures in those days, but if there had been, she would have said it was like one.

Long shadows were falling on the carpet of grass when a man rode out of the trail herd and raised both hands above his head. She knew that was a signal that there was nothing more to come out of the heard. So, the herd had been cut and not a shot fired, after all of old Shag's bluster. She saw men hurry to cut away to the north-west, while others rode around the trail herd, quieting them after the disturbance. Then she saw three men riding towards the house. The tall one would be her father. The others must be Cam and Lew. Yes, one of them was Cam, but the other—No, that was not Lew. Why were they coming to the front gate? No one ever came there. Why didn't they go on to the cow-camp, under the trees? They dismounted and came up the walk, Cam on one side of old Mont, and the other man on the other side. She watched them as they came on. Her father was walking, but he looked so queer

"This is my daughter, Miss Jackson, Mr. Carleton," introduced the old ranchman, as they reached the steps.

Clemmie extended her hand. Carleton held old Mont's arm with his left hand, while wtih his right he raised his hat and bowed, as if he had never seen the woman before him until that moment. Clemmie, the queen, bit her lip. This man had ignored her hand. It was dusk, but suddenly Clemmie noticed that her father was pale, and his face looked drawn.

"Why—why, Daddy, what makes you look so pale!"

"Nothin' serious, honey. Just got shot in the leg and bled some."

"How? Who?"

"Old Shag Sanders. We had a little fight this morning. Lew and two others were killed.

Old Cam Sneed was looking square at Clemmie's face. There was not a quiver, more than there would have been if any other man had died. His poor partner had died for nothing.

Cam and Carleton supported Mont into the big family room, where there was a spare bed. Climbing the stair to his

own room would be too much for that crippled leg. Under the crude surgery of the two cowboys, with the fluttering assistance of Mrs. Jackson, the wound, which was a clean bullet hole through the muscles of the calf of the right leg, just below the boot top, was dressed, and old Mont was put to bed. It would not have been a severe wound, but for six or seven hours the old giant had kept to his saddle, with his boot full of blood.

"You boys'll know what to do," said Mont, weakly, as the two were leaving. "I expect I'll be laid up for two-three days."

Not once had Frank Carleton spoken to Clemmie. He hadn't even looked at her, more than he had looked at the furniture in the room.

"All right, Mont," said Cam. "We'll do our best," and they went out, leaving the patient to his wife and daughter.

CHAPTER VII

THE NIGHT AFTER THE BATTLE

THE trail outfit was reduced to twenty-three men, three of whom were wounded. Carleton had talked to them and told them to hold the herd where it was, until he'd decided what to do by morning. He knew it was best for him to be away from them that night. They'd have to digest the situation and talk it over among themselves. The trailers were sullen, and one of their number who acted as spokesman boldly informed him that they'd decide by morning what they'd do. So the matter stood. The trailers had lost their leader, but they were not out of the reckoning by any means. Part of them were willing enough to take orders from Carleton; a few because they liked him, but most because they didn't care who they took orders from so long as they drew their pay. Some were for quitting the outfit and taking the back trail. What they might do before morning was a problem.

At the J Bar B, old John Banks and Bert were holding a caucus in the office.

"Here's the whole thing," growled Bert. "There's no more doing things under cover. I've been telling you for

six months that the only way to cinch things was to put Old Man Mont out of the way. Then we——"

"Well, you had a good chance and a good excuse for putting him out of the way to-day," snarled Banks. "Why didn't you do it?"

"Aw, hell! You don't think I'm fool enough to ride into a deal like that when I can keep out."

"Don't look like it. I told you Mont Jackson was the worst man in a gun-fight that ever was in the Little River country. He was, but he ain't now. That Carleton feller has got him outclassed on every point in the game, and——"

"Well, that ain't got anything to do with us. What I'm trying to tell you is that we might just as well show our hand and get the stuff while we can. With what he cut out of the herd to-day, old Mont will have the rise of three thousand steers. They're up some, and they'll bring him around fifteen thousand dollars. Let him get that much money, so's to ease the bank and pay his men, and it's all off."

"How are we goin' to stop him?"

"Easy enough, if we do it to-night. Stampede his steers and scatter 'em plumb to hell. Then, when a chance offers, pick 'em up and work 'em back on to our range. Then when a trail herd comes along, unload. They'll be plenty more that'll buy cheap stuff."

"Huh! Hadn't thought about that."

"Well, it'll work. I can take ten men and do it easy to-night while everybody's wore out. It won't do to wait. That trail herd may move in the morning, and we got to have somebody to lay it on if any talk starts."

"Yes, I reck'n you're right, Bert, but I hate for us to have to mix into anything like that. I always wanted to get along 'thout no trouble," whined Banks.

"Course! It's best, when you can, but I've known ever since he made that talk in the Bronco that snowy day, and looked the way he did at Curly's grave, that old Mont was going to bring things to a showdown the first chance he got. He's got all the little fellers in the country ready to join him, and a lot of the big ones is lookin' down their noses. If he puts this across on us, and get plumb away with it, nothin' ain't going to stop him. He's always been uppity. He claims to be honest, and I reck'n he is. He's wearin' the

badge of honesty, and it spells B-U-S-T-E-D. Let him get out of the hole once, and you'll see what happens. A man with money, and his neighbours thinking he's honest—whether he is or not—is a real booger. They's just one more chance. Say the word, and I'll pull it to-night. If not, I'm going to saddle and ride from here while the ridin's good."

At that moment, squatted on their heels a little way from the M J chuck wagon, old Cam Sneed and Frank Carleton were talking in low tones.

"Mr. Sneed——" began Carleton.

"If you don't mind, just call me Cam. It makes me feel kinder lonesome to be called mister, especially when I'm disposed to like a feller right well."

"All right, Cam. Thank you. It's worth a lot to have someone disposed to like me just now. I was about to say that Mr. Jackson probably thinks this is the end of his troubles, when in reality it may be just the beginning.

"Been thinkin' about that. Prob'ly all he's done is just to rile the animals some."

"That's about the idea. That fellow Parker gave the whole thing away when he admitted that Bert sent him out to get me. He lied, of course, for Bert knew very little, if anything, about me. He was out to get Old Man Mont Jackson."

"I wish we could make Mont believe that."

"I'm only afraid he'll have to believe it too soon. Cam, there's no animal on earth that is more relentless than an angry man."

"Not less'n it's a angry woman," drawled Cam.

"Well, there are women in this fight, so far as I know, but there are some men that are pretty sore. Of course those trail drivers are mad, but they have no leader, and if they undertook anything rough they'd never agree. On the other hand, old Banks and his son have had their meat snatched right out from under their paws."

"Yes, and a varmint takes it harder if you take his feed away from him after he's got it than he do if he don't get no feed a-tall."

"How many men are there at the J Bar B?"

"Oh, 'bout like we got. Neighbourhood of thirty maybe."

"They're not hurt much. They lost two men to-day and got two hurt, Parker and one more. They'd be more likely than any one else to start something."

"When?"

"To-night. While they think no one is watching."

"I don't see what they can do. Most of our stuff is scattered back in the edge of the timber, between here and Paint Hills. I told the boys to scatter the ones they drove up from the cut so they wouldn't be easy to start running."

"That was a good idea, but Banks don't know that. Could you get about three of the boys to scatter out and watch, between the horse-trap and where the M J cattle are bedded?"

"What about somebody between here and the trail herd?"

"That won't be necessary. They're not going to try anything."

"Yes, I guess I can get the boys to do anything I want 'em to do. They can take watches, same as any other time."

"Good! I wish you'd do that. I may be over-cautious, but that's better than wishing to-morrow that you had done it."

Cam went to set the guard, telling the men that he was acting under old Mont's orders. That wasn't exactly true, but he had told Mont he would do the best he could, and he was trying to do that. When he came back, Frank was saddling his horse.

"Where are you going now?" asked Cam.

"Nowhere. I just like to have a horse saddled in case I need one for something."

"Never thought of that. Guess I'll drag one out myself."

The men rode away quietly to their posts. Cam and Frank sat for a long time smoking in silence. Each was turning over in his mind his own problems. Cam was thinking about Lew. How he had so suddenly lost his head over Clemmie. He couldn't understand it. It was hard to realize that Lew was gone. He was erratic at times, and often talked out of turn, but he was a lovable fellow and a staunch friend. One of those rare men that one could always place, and didn't know how to quit a friend. The grim old puncher was

grateful for this young fellow who had sense enough to keep him company without talking his head off.

Carleton was thinking of just what this war meant to the cowmen. If it was won, it meant peace, prosperity, and security in the rights of property. If it was lost, it meant perpetuation of the same chaos that had prevailed since trail-driving began. It was a war between right and wrong, between honesty and dishonesty. He recalled with bitterness in his heart what had happened in the coast country, where he was born and where he had lived until the last few years. It was the cause of his being an itinerant puncher, instead of running his own cattle on his own ranch. He was as near a tramp at that moment as Texas knew anything about in those days. If only the people, the honest, decent cowmen, could realize the value of the blow old Mont Jackson had struck that day. Would they do it? Would they join him, and help carry on the fight before the rustlers joined together and wiped him out? It was doubtful. Other honest men had undertaken the same thing in different localities, and most of them were dead and their cattle gone.

The hours dragged on. Cam roused the second watch just before midnight. The relieved men came in and reported everything quiet. They had seen no one.

"Don't you aim to sleep none to-night, Frank?" asked Cam, as the others sought their blankets.

"I don't think I will," replied Frank. "If you're sleepy, just stretch out there on the ground and get a nap. I'll wake you if anything comes up."

How long he slept, Cam didn't know, but he roused from a touch and a whispered word from Frank and sat up wide awake.

"Follow me, quick!" and Frank crept away towards the ranch-house.

The com-camp was between the pens and the house and not more than a hundred and fifty yards from the north fence of the big yard. At the yard fence they halted and listened. There was a stealthy step inside the yard, and a moment later a match flared, showing a man stooped by the side of the house, with his back to them.

"Who's there?" called Frank, in a low tone that wouldn't disturb those in the house.

The man dropped the match, sprang up and ran lightly towards the front of the yard. It was dark as pitch in among the trees, which were now in full leaf.

"Bring the horses, quick," whispered Frank, and ran away along the outside of the fence, towards the front.

When he stopped at the corner he could hear a man climbing the fence within fifty feet of him. There was no more than the sound and a blurred form that rose above the fence, but that was enough. Frank's gun flashed, and a body fell outside the fence. A moment later, and Cam came hurrying up with the horses. As they mounted they heard a horse tearing away around the horse-trap, towards the M J herd, and gave chase. They passed the north line of the horse-trap and sped on after the fugitive. Suddenly, half a dozen shots were fired, dead ahead of them, and a minute later a riderless horse came galloping towards them.

"The boys must have got him," said Frank, as they reined in.

The loose horse stopped, and Cam caught it.

"Huh! No," grunted Cam. "That's Chuck's mount. Got snake rattles on the bridle." Chuck was one of the M J riders who had gone out with the second watch. "Guess they must have got him."

While they were talking, two more horses came from the same direction, but they were ridden, and the riders were talking.

"Who's that?" called Cam.

"Hallo! That you, Cam?"

"Yes, what's happened?"

"Why, a half a dozen of that danged trail outfit jumped us just now. Rode square into us. They creased Chuck. I got him here behind me. They's a horse, and maybe a man or two, layin' out there where they jumped us.

"Let them lie there," said Frank. "We'd better get back to camp before we run into a trap here in the dark."

Chuck, who had been merely grazed across the scalp by a bullet and had come around all right, was the only one of the M J men who had a scratch. Two of the boys took Chuck over to the bunk-shack and dressed his wound. All the men had turned out, and now there was a real guard placed about the Mary Jane.

"What's all the row about, Cam?" Mont Jackson called from an open window.

Cam and Frank climbed the fence and went to the window. Cam told about the attempt to fire the house and the fight in the dark between his guard and the raiders.

"Going to burn me and my family in the house like rats in a haystack!" stormed Old Man Mont. "I'll be out in a minute."

"No, no, Mr. Jackson!" begged Frank. "Nothing can be done now. The boys are all on watch. Nothing more will happen, now that they know we are awake. Stay in bed and take care of that leg. We'll need you more later on."

"Who was it?"

"We don't know, sir," said Frank. "Some of the boys that were on guard said it was a gang from the trail herd. We can't tell until morning.

"How you going to tell then?"

"There's a horse, and maybe a man or two, out on the prairie where they jumped the guard."

"Who stopped 'em from firing the house?"

"Why, we——"

"Frank saw 'em," interrupted honest old Cam Sneed. "I was asleep, and he woke me."

Standing back in the shadows, Clemmie, who had come down to hear what it was all about, understood that this stranger had saved their home and perhaps their lives. She resented it. Why couldn't it have been Cam or some other M J puncher instead of this smart Alec who ignored, people's hands?

There would be no more sleep that night. Old Man Mont went back to bed because the leg was hurting now like the very devil. Clemmie went back to her room and dressed; then she came back and lit a lamp. She was going into action. Besides herself, there was only one thing on earth that she really loved, and that was old Mont. He was caught in the toils, and she was going to play mouse to his lion.

"Daddy," she said, fixing a pillow under old Mont's leg, to make it easier, "you don't often make mistakes, but you've made one."

"How's that, honey?"

"Why—why, in taking up this *Mister* Carleton," and there was a world of scorn in her tone.

"Why, Clem, what's the matter with you? He's just kept us from being burned like rats in a barn."

"Maybe he has, and maybe he hasn't. Maybe if he hadn't been here those trail drivers wouldn't have bothered you. Maybe they thought this good friend of yours was sleeping in your house."

This stumped Old Man Mont. There had been so many things to think of that such a possibility hadn't occurred to him. He had taken the young fellow on his own word and let it go at that. Carleton had gone with him into the fight. That it was possible he did such a thing just out of spite against old Shag had not occurred to him once. Perhaps Clemmie was right. Women did seem to have a sort of sixth sense about men sometimes.

"Why, Clem, I hadn't thought of that."

"I had. If he's the confidential man of Brown & Candley, as he told you he was, why ain't he out there at the trail camp taking care of their property? Why hasn't he got more authority with their men? When a man's an outcast from as hard a bunch as that he's apt to be pretty bad. You aren't in any shape to fight the whole world, and you're certainly not in any shape to harbour men that can't hold a job with a crooked trail outfit. Why can't you get along without trouble, like the J Bar B outfit, and——"

Old Mont came up on his elbows and glared at his daughter. He hadn't told her any of the particulars of the fight the day before. He had been trying to shape the thing in his mind so that he could tell her without hurting her too much, but when she insinuated that she wanted him to be in the class of John Banks and his outfit he forgot consideration for her feelings.

"If I thought you wanted me to be in the class of old John Banks and that boy of his'n, Clemmie, I'd just as soon be dead as alive."

"Why, Daddy, what do you mean?"

"I didn't aim to tell you just what did happen yesterday—yet. Now I'll have to. When we jumped old Shag Sanders yesterday, John Banks and Bert were delivering to him a thousand M J steers that they had stole. When it was over I told Banks and his boy that if I ever seen either one of

'em driven' an M J cow brute ag'in I'd kill him. Now do you want to be like the J Bar B outfit?"

"Certainly not, if they're like that, but couldn't there be some mistake?"

"No, there couldn't be any mistake. I've been thinking there was something wrong with the J Bar B outfit for some time, and now I know what it is. They're rustlers."

"Well, if they are, and I still think there is some mistake about it all, you're in no shape to fight the whole world. I thought it was right to cut the trail herd, and from the viewpoint of justice perhaps it was, but it was poor business for a man hat was already on the verge of ruin. Now that you have your cattle you'll never sell them. The word will pass down the line that you fight trail outfits and give harbur to their outcasts and their enemies. They'll steal all they can from you, but they'll never buy any. You might patch up the quarrel between you and the J Bar B, but you won't ever settle with the trail drivers. You'll be paying on that debt until your last cow is gone. This Carleton threw the trail people after he got into their confidence. You being crazy mad at the trailers, it was easy for him to make you see things that were not there. Being on the outside looking in, I can see your mistake."

Old Mont lay a long time pondering the problem. There was no doubt in his mind that Banks and his son were thieves. He even thought of Parker's attempt to waylay and murder some of the M J outfit. Still, there might be something in Clemmie's contention about Carleton. Clemie was a shrewd girl, and, as she said, she had not been in the mess, but looking on.

"Maybe you're right, honey," he said at last. "It's a cinch I can't fight the whole world in the shape I'm in now, and it looks like most of it is ready to jump on me. If this goes on, I'm apt to get killed and leave you and yo' mother broke. I know men pretty well, and I know some things that you won't ever know but, still, I could make a mistake. I don't believe Carleton is crooked, but it won't make any difference to us. He'll go down and take charge of the trail herd in the morning and I reck'n go on about his business."

"Maybe he will," sneered Clemmie. "I've got to see him boss that trail outfit before I believe it."

"Well, shade the lamp, and I'll try to go to sleep for a while," said old Mont wearily.

Clemmie turned the lamp low and stuck a letter in one of the braces that held the chimney; then she went over by a window and sat down. The old ranchman uttered a long sigh and then lay still, but he didn't go to sleep. He was thinking. There had never been much rustling in the Little River country until trail-driving began. He had opposed it from the first. A man's cattle were his own property, whether they were worth anything or not. He had watched the price climb from nothing to five dollars ahead for grown steers. As the price rose, stealing increased.

The trail-drivers were indirectly responsible for all of it. If they wouldn't buy stolen cattle and refuse to have their herds cut, the incentive to steal and the ability to dispose of stolen stock wouldn't be so great. From the first he had been opposed to mavericking without regard to the other fellow's range. Then he had talked to other cowmen, tried to show them what this loose way of doing business must lead to. Some there were, a majority of them, in fact, who agreed with him and frankly confessed that they were afraid of the rustlers and trail-drivers combined.

He had vowed he would cut trail herds. Now he had cut one. Three of his men were dead; others were hurt, and he himself had a bullet wound in his leg. He had hoped that if he made the start others would join him, but would they? Now that he had defied the crooked trailers and the rustlers that stood in with them there would be no half-way ground; either he must win, or his enemies would bring about his utter ruin. The attempt to burn his house showed clearly how far they would go. Clemmie had put her finger on the weak spot when she said that now he had three thousand steers but couldn't sell them, and nothing could be done without money. His men hadn't been paid for months. They were waiting until he sold the beef to get their money. What chance had he to win? None.

Then he thought of Clemmie's suggestion that he might have been mistaken about old John Banks and Bert. Even when he had told her of seeing them delivering his cattle to Shag Sanders she still had seemed unsatisfied. Could it be possible that his daughter still meant to marry Bert Banks? He knew they had quarrelled along about Christmas and that

Bert had not been at his house since then, but that was nothing. He knew that Clemmie had merely to crook her finger and Bert would come crawling to her. At thought of this, rage mastered him, and he snarled in his throat like an enraged animal.

"What is it, Dad?" asked Clemmie, starting up from her chair by the window.

Old Mont made no reply. The girl, supposing he had strangled in his sleep, settled back in her chair, while the old man went on thinking. The burden of his thoughts, from that time on, was Frank Carleton and the possibility that he had made a mistake in the man.

CHAPTER VIII

SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE

THE hours dragged on. Once the men were all out on guard Frank Carleton camly lay down on the bare ground, pillowed his head on one arm and went to sleep. When he woke it was daylight. Old Cam Sneed was standing looking at him.

"Frank you're plumb human," drawled the old puncher. "When you ain't got nothing else to do you can sleep like a baby. I think you and me better take a little round and see what we can find before the trail gets mussed up."

He had their horses already saddled. Sitting at her window, Clemmie saw the two ride slowly along the north side of the big yard and stop at the front corner. She saw them dismount, then walk a few steps along the front fence. They were out of her sight by that time, but she went to a front window. Dimly she could see them stooping over something upon the ground. They were talking, but she could catch nothing they said. Presently they walked to their horses, mounted, and rode hurriedly away around the horse-trap.

"What are you looking at, Clem?" called old Mont, from his bed.

"Cam and *Mister* Carleton."

"What're they doing?"

"Trailing somebody, I reck'n, but they're going the wrong way. Guess Carleton is trying to lead Cam off the trail until it gets cold. If they wanted the man that tried to set the house on fire they should have gone straight to *Mister* Carleton's friends at the trail camp."

Old Mont made no reply. Clemmie went back to her chair by the window. Mrs. Jackson had dressed and gone down to the kitchen to superintend making a breakfast for a sick man. Old Man Mont had told her, privately, about John Banks and Bert, and had ended the recital with the statement that he didn't want to ever again hear her couple her daughter's name with that of Bert Banks. She was utterly crushed, for the one dearest hope of her life had been lost. She knew it was lost, for old Mont had told her something he had not told Clemmie. That something was that, before he'd see his daughter marry a thief and cold killer, he'd hunt up Bert and shoot him like the dog he was. She had never known Mont to break a promise, and the crushing of her hope was final.

Half an hour passed and then Clemmie saw Cam and Frank ride back. Frank took the horses on to the cow-camp, and Cam came trundling his spurs on to the house. He knocked at the door and she opened it.

"Morning, Cam. Come in!" called old Mont.

"How's that laig?" asked Cam.

"Pretty sore, but it'll soon be all right. What you fellows been doing?"

"That's what I com to tell you, and then they's a few things——"

"Go ahead," commanded Mont.

"It ain't very pretty," said Cam, and glanced towards Clemmie, who was watching his leathery face for some sign of what was on his mind—and saw none.

"Oh, don't mind me," said Clemmie. "I guess I'll get used to things that ain't very nice before long."

"All right," and he seemed to address his question to her. "You recollect that Ace Potter that's been stickin' to Bert Banks like a flea to a dog's ear the last year or two?"

"Yes, what about him?" Clemmie replied, crisply.

"Nothing much—now. He's lying just outside the front fence awful dead."

"What!" roared old Mont. "Dead! Why, how——"

"Frank shot him half in two last night as he climbed the fence after he tried to set the house on fire."

Astounded, neither Mont nor his daughter spoke. Old Cam had come in with his hands behind him and kept them there as he stood just inside the door. Suddenly he drew from behind him a man's hat. It was of much finer quality than that usually worn by an ordinary puncher. A piece of narrow ribbon had been passed under the band and tied in a love-knot.

"Maybe you'll know this."

Two bright red spots came in Clemmie's cheeks, but she couldn't speak.

"Well, I'll damned!" old Mont rapped out. "Where'd you find that hat, Cam?"

"At the corner of the horse-trap, where the gent got on his horse in a sort of hurry, I reck'n. It ain't Ace's. He still had his on, an' we put it over his face to keep the sun out of his eyes." There was the coldness of eternal vengeance in old Cam's voice as he went on. "I wanted to ask you what to do with Ace's carcass. Then, they's some more. They's a mighty good J Bar B bronc layin' dead where they jumped Chuck last night. Then, right clost, they's two second-hand J Bar B punchers—both right dead, also."

"My God! Was it the J Bar B outfit that tried to burn me in my bed last night?" demanded old Mont. "Looks right smart like it," drawled Cam. "Point is, what must we do with them carcasses? For my part, I'd as soon the hogs et 'em as not."

"No. Bury 'em, same as if they were humans," thundered old Mont. "They can't be sent home, for guns'll crack every time an M J puncher meets a J Bar B man from here on until it's all over."

"Mine will," said Cam, grimly, and, turning on his heel, he went out to see to the burial of three J Bar B men.

Clemmie had not spoken a word. Cam had thrown Bert Banks' hat on a chair. There was the tell-tale ribbon that she herself had tied in a love-knot. She knew she had tied it there to hold Bert until such time as she should want him to came back to her. How well it had held was witnessed by the fact that after all these months it had not been removed. Within the hour she had been thinking of sending for Bert.

Even of marrying him forthwith, to stop the row and prevent her father's ruin. And now——

"Well, are you satisfied, Clem?"

There was no note of tenderness in the question. Clemmie spoke no word, but dragged herself wearily from the room where that hellish hat, with its ribbon bow, and the cold eyes of old Mont Jackson were haunting her.

An hour later, breakfast over and the other men gone to bury the dead, Cam and Frank came to the house.

"I've come to make a proposition to you, Mr. Jackson," said Frank. "I'm going down to the trail camp now and talk to those fellows. If they're reasonable, and I think they will be, I intend to put those five thousand Brown & Candley cattle into Dodge City. I'll be short-handed, and I'll probably have to fight my way, especially through the J Bar B range. Cam tells me you have around three thousand steers. The proposal I have to make is this: throw your cattle into my outfit. Go along yourself, if you're able. If not, send Cam. Take as many men as can be spared from the ranch, and we'll have enough to handle the herd."

"That would sound mighty good to me, Carleton," said old Mont, "if I had the money to do it, but I'm broke."

"Brown & Candley have plenty of money. They'd want their cattle moved, and I'm afraid to drive through with such a small outfit. You can pay your share of the expense out of the proceeds from the sale of your cattle."

"That's mighty fair, but—the fact is, Carleton, there's a mortgage on mp cattle, and I don't believe the bank would let me drive 'em. Let Cam go wtih you down to the herd. Meantime, I'll think the matter over. If you get your arrangements made maybe I can persuade Morton to let me throw in with you."

Cam and Frank rode away towards the trail camp. The other hands rode off towards the big loose herd of M J's, to keep them from drifting down the valley and mixing with the trail herd. They were a grim-faced lot of riders. They knew what a range war was like, and they knew they were in one. Fighting was imminent, any moment. No telling what was over the next hill. The Mary Jane outfit had been winners in the fight of the night before. They might be losers in the next one.

There was little movement about the trail camp. A

few riders were around the cattle, which were grazing quietly in the valley. Obviously the outfit was waiting for Frank to come and talk things over, as he had promised he would. As they rode up, a tall, well-dressed man rose from where he sat on a roll of bedding. He was probably forty, slim enough to be almost skinny, had a long, hooked nose and keen greenish-grey eyes under shaggy brows.

"Hallo, Frank," called this gentleman.

"Why, howdy, Mr. Candley! Mighty glad to see you right now. You've taken a load off my mind."

"Then I reckon everybody's satisfied. I got your report, and it didn't look very good to me, so I brought half a dozen men and came on to see the herd through."

"Fine thing you did. Old Man Shag wouldn't pay any attention to me, and he got things in a pretty bad mess."

"Hum! From what I can learn from the men, it was not Shag so much as you that made the mess."

"How, I?"

"Well, Shag was trail boss. He had a right to fire you—if he did. You had a right to quit—if, as some of them say, you did. But you didn't have a right to go over to the enemy and turn that wicked gun of yours on my men while you were still drawing my pay. Brown & Candley hired you for one thing, and you undertook to do something else."

"Then I misunderstood my orders," said Frank. "I was told to go to Red River and follow this trail back, look into conditions, and report. I did that. My report stated that this herd, and any other herd driving this trail this year, woull be cut. I advised swinging further west and tried to persuade Shag to do it. He refused, and, following your instructions, I joined the outfit as a hand and prepared to go on and carry out the balance of your instructions—that is, watch Shag and see that he didn't steal you out when he sold."

"You put that pretty raw. Anyway, since I'm going on with the herd, you'll not be needed. In the first place, a majority of the boys refuse to work with you. If that were not true I refuse to employ a man who connives with others to rob me."

"I didn't do that," and there was a cold smile on Frank's lips, but there was no trace of it in his eyes. "I did

connive with others to keep your crooked trail-boss from stealing a thousand steers, and I'll do it again. I'll go farther than that. I'll connive with honest men to keep you, or any other man, from stealing their property."

"What do you mean!" thundered Candley, dropping his hand to his gun.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Candley," said Frank, coolly and calmly. "There's no particular reason why I should kill you, and I'll do it if you draw that gun. Don't you suppose I know that you knew all the time what Shag was doing. I've been working for you because I was outlawed in the coast country and I needed a job. You hired me because you knew I was honest and you could trust me. Damn your job. You don't have to fire me. I'll quit you just like I quit Shag, and for the same reason—because I don't think you're honest."

A cold grin twisted Frank's lips, as he sat with his hand poised over the milled handle of his rusty old gun, waiting for Candley to draw. Obviously, Candley knew when the game was blocked.

"Oh, that grandstand stuff won't get you anywhere," snarled Candley, taking his hand from the very neighbourhood of his gun. "I've told you I was letting you go because I didn't think you was honest."

"Yes," laughed Frank, "and for fear I forget it, for there's someone in the gang that didn't hear all I said, I'm quitting you because I *do* think you are a damned thief. In spite of that I'll do you one favour. If you want to get this herd to Red River, let anybody cut it that wants to—because it'll be cut."

"Keep your advice," snapped Candley, white with rage, and deathly afraid of the man before him. "I owe you three hundred dollars and here it is."

"Thank you," said Frank, poking the roll of bills in his pocket with his left hand, and never taking his eyes off Candley. "Old Shag was too much of a man to shoot me in the back, but I won't trust you."

"Never mind him, Frank," said a grisly old puncher. There were four of them, all grey-haired men, standing in a knot within ten feet of Candley. Three were white men, and the fourth was a wrinkled old Mexican *vaquero* who looked to be a hundred years old. "You can just give us our pay, Mr.

Candley," continued the spokesman. "We're quitting."

Candley had no men to spare, but he knew the metal of these four. They were the best men in the outfit, when fairly dealt with, and the worst when they had or thought they had a grievance. He knew why they were quitting and that no argument he could make would be listend to. Grudgingly he counted out their pay. Meantime, Frank and Cam turned and rode away from the camp. When they had gone about half a mile the four old trailers, having roped out their own mounts, overtook them.

"Let's stop here and make talk, Cam," said Frank.

"I reck'n a little rest won't hurt my jaws while I listen," grinned Cam, "but I hope you're in some better humour than you was when you talked to Mr. Candley."

Dismounting, they squatted on the ground, while their horses grazed near by. The four old trailers drew away a hundred yards or so, dismounted, sat down on the gound and rolled smokes. Cam wondered at this, but said nothing.

"About what I said to Candley," continued Frank. "I've been wanting to tell him that for some time but was afraid to. Not afraid of him, but afraid I'd lose my job. This morning, I didn't care. I had already lost my job. I thought I'd have to kill him, but he wasn't as much of a man as I had figured him, little as that was. If you could stand a little of my history, you'd get this better."

"Go ahead. If it gets too rough I can stop my ears."

"That's fair. Do you know anything about the cattle war in the coast country?"

"Just heard of it, 's all."

"Well, it was like this. When the packing houses were built at Fulton and Rockport, and all along the coast, the whole country was full of cattle, and no market. Pretty soon cattle began to be worth something, and trail-drivers and rustlers began to help themselves. Then it wasn't long until ranchmen began mavericking—in self-defence, they said. Two factions sprang up in the country. If a ranchman joined either faction, the other tried to steal him out. If he joined neither faction, they both jumped on him and ruined him. My father, Joe Carleton, had a good ranch on the San Antonia River and plenty of cattle. He wanted me to be an intelligent ranchman, so he sent me to the university, and——"

"I see," drawled Cam. "That's why you don't talk human and nacherl like other folks."

"Perhaps so. I graduated and came home, just in time to see the end of my father's cattle business—and of his life. He had refused to join either faction. He was honest, and he thought others ought to be honest or else be punished for their dishonesty. Gradually the opposing factions stole him down to little more than a milk bunch. Then came the end. With a few faithful old punchers who had been with him for years, he undertook to cut some of his cattle out of a crooked herd and was killed."

"About what's goin' to happen to Old Man Mont before this mess is over," interrupted Cam. "This stealin' sickness has spread up the trail from the coast country, just like black-leg and other cattle diseases do. If you get to 'em in time, and kill and burn, or bury them that has it, the sickness stops and don't poison the range. This stealing sickness could be stopped that way, maybe, but it's got to be stopped pretty quick."

"That's an apt description of it," smiled Frank. "It seems that nothing short of death and fire will stop it. Anyway, I had just got home from school and was not saddle-toughened good when my farther was killed. It was the end of things for me. Both my parents were dead. I was a ranchman, with no thought for any other business, so I had prepared for nothing else. For me to go to work with any cow outfit in the coast country was to start a quarrel at once, so nobody would hire me. Three years ago, when trail-driving started north, I went to Mr. Brown and asked for a job. Brown was not a cowman, but a banker, and an old friend of my father. He hired me. Brown furnished the money and Candley handled the business, so far as trail-driving went. I hadn't been wtih them a year until I felt sure that Brown had hired me to watch Candley, though he never mentioned it. I soon saw that Candley was crooked, but he was shrewd enough to make old Shag the goat. A hundred times I have wanted to come to grips with Candley and tell him what he was, but caution held me back. Cattle were worth nothing while I was at school, and a debt of a thousand dollars was made in order for me to finish. The person the money was borrowed from was in need by this time, and I hung to a distasteful job in order to pay it. It's paid,

and I'm free to do as I please. There are some other things I'll pay—if I live—but not with money nor with the land that my father left me."

There was a curious ring in Frank's voice, as if it might break into a wail, as he finished. Old Cam glanced off towards the group of grizzled riders who sat on the ground, calmly waiting.

"Those four men," said Frank, regaining control of his voice, "followed the herd yesterday when the fight took place. They are the only survivors of the fight in which my father was killed. They had worked for him from boyhood. The only reason they were with the trail herd was that no one in the coast country would employ them. They got work with Brown & Candley, because they had to eat. The trailers took them on because such men are hard to find. True as steel, brave as men get, and as skilful men as ever rode a horse. There's not one of the four that has not showed me how to rope a calf, ride a hose, and sling a gun, when I was a kid. They quit a job that was paying them fifty dollars a month, just because they thought the outfit wasn't giving me a square deal. And now——"

"Now what?" asked Cam.

"The five of us are soldiers of fortune. We'll eat while there is a cent of money in anybody's pocket. Then, if we haven't found work—Cam, did you ever want to go bad?"

"Why, I ain't never been very good, but they's been times that I could been easy persuaded to be a whole lot worse, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean. At this moment, after having been schooled in honesty and the behaviour of a gentleman from infancy, with the very instincts of a gentleman bred in me, I am asking myself, does it pay. All these years since my father's death, I have hoped that when the country was rid of this 'stealing sickness,' as you call it, I'd go back to the old ranch-house where I was born and there among the moss-grown liveoaks start over again. Instinctively I'm honest. Instinctively I'm for the honest man against the thief, and yet——"

"They say that's the best policy," growled Cam, in a noncommittal tone.

"Yes, I know they do. I've heard it preached enough but there comes times when a fellow doubts it. I've lived by

that rule until now, and I'll soon be thirty. I was living by it when I hunted up old Mont Jackson and helped him get back a thousand stolen cattle, but did I do him a good turn? Look what has come on him. A finish fight between him and the J Bar B. Banks has got the trailers to leg for him, and in the end they'll break Jackson and kill him. I'm right now where the toss of a coin decides for me. Yonder are four hard men. They have killed a-plenty, in fair fight. They're loyal to the last degree and will follow me anywhere. If I say go to some crooked outfit and throw in with them, they'll follow me. We'll get plenty of money, for we all know the game, from observation. Men have taken everything on earth from me. The question is, why shouldn't I take my own from them? I'm ready to toss the coin."

"Just a minute, Frank," drawled old Cam. "I've romped around the burnt edges of hell in this old world ontel my boots were scorched many a time. I been right where you are now, and I've tossed the coin, but somehow she always comes up heads. Mebbe the Big Trail Boss up yonder had something to do with it. I dunno. I taken a liking to you that day when you jumps in and stops old Shag's rough talk to a woman. I wisht you'd let me throw this coin for you. Mebbe my luck holds."

"All right, Cam. I need a friend right now."

"Fine! Here she goes. Old Mont Jackson is three men short from the fight yesterday, and he's laid up with a bullet hole in the calf of his laig. It ain't bad, but he can't ride for a while. The J Bar B is going to ride him ragged, and he needs more men."

"Yes, but I'd never ask him for a job, after what I've pulled him into, and I wouldn't ask him to take on men from the trail outfit, when he think's they're all thieves and killers."

"All right, here goes the coin. I'll go talk to Old Man Mont. You take yo' four men and go on out to where the boys are cuttin' the stock cattle out and throwin' 'em west so's they can drift the steers on down the valley and hold 'em. When I see you again, if old Mont is willin' to take you on, it's head and you stay straight. If he don't it's tails; you go plumb to hell—and I'll go with you!"

As Frank and his four toughened riders jogged on off towards the M J herd, old Cam jogged to the Mary Jane.

It didn't occur to him that there was an element of chance in the game he was playing.

CHAPTER IX

THE COIN BALANCES

WHEN Frank Carleton made his proposal to old Mont Jackson, before going to the trail-herd that morning, there were two things of which he had no thought. One was that Candley would be at the herd. The other was that Clemmie Jackson was standing just outside of the door .and heard everpthing that was said.

Old Man Mont was on a spare bed in the big family room. He had been put there because he couldn't climb the stairs with his crippled leg. He had lost a lot of blood and was weak. Lying on the bed, his blood moved sluggishly, and his mind was depressed. When Frank and Cam had gone out, he lay worrying over his situation and seeing only the dark side. Not that, exactly, either. All sides were dark just then, but he was looking at the darkest side of the picture when Clemmie came in.

"You're certainly not going to throw your cattle in with that trail-herd," she said. "You can get them stole easy enough by just leaving 'em here on the range. According to your statement, the J Bar B outfit will take 'em without you having to deliver 'em."

"Now, see here, Clemmie," said old Mont, fretfully, "I ain't in no shape to argue with you or anybody else. I reck'n I've made a pretty bad mistake starting the mess just now, when I'm already in the hole. Looks like I ain't going to have no chance to sell my cattle, and——"

"That's no reason why you should give 'em away. That's what you'll be doing if you turn 'em over to *Mister* Carleton."

A long silence followed. It seemed as if old Mont hadn't heard his daughter. At last he turned his head on the pillow.

"Clemmie, I reck'n I love you about as well as ary man ever a daughter," he said. "I wish I knowed right now what

was the best thing to do for yo' happiness. They ain't much more of life comin' to me, but all of yo'n's ahead of you, and I don't want you to make a mess of it."

He stopped. What he wanted to know more than anything else was Clemmie's attitude towards Bert Banks, with all the facts before her. He had said he'd kill Bert before he should marry Clemmie, but, when the showdown came, would he do it? Would he do it, knowing it would break Clemmie's heart? Presently he took another tack.

"What makes you so bitter ag'in' Carleton?"

"Why, he's a killer."

"Yes. He killed Ace Potter pretty dead last night, but I don't see how you can hold that ag'in' him when——"

"That might be excused, but he's—he's a trail-driver and that means a killer and a thief."

"No, it doesn't. They'se trail-drivers a-plenty that's honest as I am. Frank was hired by a crooked outfit. When it comes to a cold showdown, he quit before he'd steal."

"How do you know all that?" sneered Clemmie.

"He told me."

"Oh, he did! And I suppose you took his word as gospel?"

"Not exactly. I know men, some. Then, he went in with me and showed me he was clean. Last night he just about saved all of us. Have you ever talked to him?"

"I talked to him the day I went to the herd."

"Yes, and from what I can learn he kept you from getting insulted a whole lot worse than you was."

"I can take care of myself," snapped Clemmie.

"That's just what I'm afraid you can't do. You say I'm mistaken about the Carleton fellow. Do you reck'n I made any worse mistake about him than you made about the man that runs from under that hat last night when he was trying to set my house afire?" And he pointed to hat that still lay on the chair where Cam had left it.

"Some—someone else might have been wearing that hat," stammered Clemmie, to red spots showing in her cheeks.

"Yes, they might, but someone else didn't send a man to waylay and murder on the trail between the Mary Jane and Paint Hill."

Clemmie saw the colour rise in old Mont's face, and the graveyard gates in his eyes swung open. She heard him

say: "Until you can do a little better job pickin' men, I don't want you to tell me how," and she knew from his tone that she'd never discuss Carleton with him again. With face aflame, she fled to her own room, above stairs. Still not knowing her attitude towards Bert, except from the excuses she made for him, old Mont went on worrying.

From her window Clemmie could see far down the Little River Valley. She saw six men ride away from the trail-herd, and stop in the prairie, where they dismounted and sat for a long time. She saw one lone rider mount and ride away on the back-trail over which the big herd had come. She saw the trail camp broken, the wagon pull on ahead, and the herd set slowly on the move. Then she saw five of the six men ride off towards the M J herd, while one lone rider came on towards the house. That would be Cam, coming to get her father's decision. She wanted to hear what it was, but she didn't want to face old Mont in his present mood. If she could prevent it in any way, those cattle would never go to the trail-herd. At last she crept down the steps to where she could hear through the open door. She had missed the first part of Cam's report, but she was in time for Mont's answer.

"No, I reck'n I can't do that, Cam," she heard him say. "I've thought the whole thing over, and I'm in a hole, and one that I dug myself by trying to hurry this herd-cutting business. It's just as well. Morton wouldn't want me to drive the cattle, and I ain't got to where I'll beg—yet. I decided I'll just turn the steers over to Morton, if he'll take 'em."

Crouched on the chair, Clemmie hugged herself at this news. That meant that Frank Carleton had passed on out of her life. She didn't know why, but ever since that first afternoon, when Carleton had virtually told her to keep quiet with his eyes, she had feared him. There was a dominant, mastering something about the man that she couldn't explain.

"What Morton will or won't do ain't got a thing to do with this," Cam was saying. "No matter what Morton wants, you won't deliver them steers to him."

"Why?"

"Because you won't have 'em."

"Hell, I won't. I've already got 'em!"

"Yes, you got 'em now, but you won't keep 'em."

"What do you mean?" There was a grating note in old Mont's voice that was unusual when he was talking to his trusted old puncher.

"Mont," said Cam, with weariness in his voice, "you've started a war. Justice is on yo' side, as you said, but justice is blind, and can't do much with a six-shooter. We fit the J Bar B yesterday and whipped 'em. We licked 'em again last night, but they won't quit. It's them or you, now. You started in to fight trail-drivers. The herd's gone. You cut it and got a thousand steers, but in doing that you inherited a war to the last man. They'll be back."

"Maybe not."

"That's what I thought last night, and, if it hadn't been for Frank, no tellin' what would have happened. You got around three thousand cattle out there. They're wild, range stuff that ain't been handled none. They'll run easy. You lose three men in the fight yesterday, and four's laid up in the bunk-house, shotten some. They was only twenty-six of us, and that leaves eighteen——"

"Nineteen," corrected old Mont.

"As I was saying, that leaves eighteen. Them many men can't eat and sleep with three thousand wild steers. They could drive 'em, but they can't hold 'em. Now, you put on five more men, and——"

"But Cam, them fellers is rough. They're right smart on the kill, and I don't——"

"Yes? Chuck was right smart on the kill, too, wasn't he, when he potted two of them fellers before they creased him. Rustlin' is a disease, like blackleg, Mont. Only way you can stamp it out is by killin' and burnin'—or buryin'—the ones that's got it. You're the only ranchman in the Little River country that's had the sand to start killin' and burpin'. You've sarted and you can't stop. If you do, they're goin' to get you."

"Oh, hell! Cam, they's reasons why I just don't see how I can do what you want."

"Well, as I tell you, eighteen men can't hold them steers, and inside of two days they'll be scattered from hell to breakfast. Then the first crooked trail outfit that comes through will get about half of 'em at a dollar a head from any rustler that wants to pick 'em up and deliver 'em."

"What makes you keep sayin' eighteen men?" asked old Mont, in a peevish tone.

The coin with which Cam had thought it would be so easy to throw heads had rolled against the wall, was balanced on edge, and wavering between his will and that of old Mont. Cam had done his best to shake it down and had failed. He had one more jolt and was going to use it. He knew that would bring the coin down with a clink, but there was a chance that it would fall "tails" instead of "heads." Still it would be down, and the suspense would be over, at least.

"Because I won't be here," he said.

"What! Mean you'd quit me, when I'm down here with my leg shot all to hell, after all I've done for——"

"Steady as she lays, Mont!" and there was compelling force in the old puncher's tones. "They's two sides to this thing, just like a flapjack. Let's butter 'em both. When the war was over I come right out of the middle of hell here to the Old Mary Jane. I been here ten year. I done more, and am still willin' to do more, for you and yo'n than for anybody else on earth. Still, I heared a story onct about a fellow that tried to jump his bronco across a ditch. When he got about half-way crost and seen how wide it was he turned and went back. That story is a dang lie. It can't be did, and I ain't fool enough to try it. When you tackled this herd cutting, rustler fighting thing, you jumped the old Mary Jane at one hell of a ditch. She can't turn and go back. If you don't aim to go across—and you can't without men —then I'm goin' to get from under."

"And leave me with a busted laig?"

"Dammit, Mont, I don't want to leave you a'tall, if they's any use staying. It's because yo' laig's bust that I'm willin' to take hold and try to keep things together ontel you get up again. All I want is some hands to do it with. If I get 'em, I stay. If I don't——"

"Cam, I ain't got no call to think hard of you," said Mont. "I had my reasons, but I guess it's up to me to run my own buisness the way I want it run, and I shore don't want you to quit, now nor no other time. I take back everything I was going to say. Go ahead and handle things yo' way, but it's goin' to make a lot of trouble."

"I aim for it to make some for anybody that monkey's with them cattle."

Old Cam's spurs jingled on out the front door. Clemmie got up from her crouching seat on the stair and crept back to

her room. Who were these five new men? Where had Cam found them? They must be the five that she had seen with him that morning after the trail-herd had left. She kept to her room, dreading to meet her father again. There had been something in the old giant's face that morning that a few others had seen but that she had never seen before. It was the look of an animal that had been driven almost too far. She really loved her father, and for the first time in her life, when she felt that she might lose his great and protecting love for her, she was in misery.

Frank Carleton's keen eyes picked out the lone rider when he was a mere dot on the prairie. The horse might be running, as this one happened to be, but at that distance the movement appeared hardly more than a crawl and could easily be passed over unless the compact blot against the neutral background had been noticed.

The rangeman's vision is long and acutely trained to discriminate instantly between animal form and rock or scrub at unbelievable distances, often saving long hours of riding to say nothing of the safety element in a country abounding with hostile men whether coppery red, white or swarthy brown. And Frank Carleton had met the best and the worst of them in his years of wandering over the wide Texas ranges.

He didn't suspect that the lone horseman was an enemy; in fact, quite the contrary, but he did suspect, as mount and man grew into more distinct shape, that he was coming with a matter that vitally concerned himself. For one thing, he was coming from the direction of the Mary Jane ranch-house, and while he might, of course, be one of several hands gone back there on some errand, Frank was inclined to doubt it, perhaps because his expectations were set on just one person—old Cam Sneed.

So, Frank watched while the pair loomed steadily larger. He was sitting his horse on a little rise just back of the first timer. Four grizzled punchers were not far from him at their ease on the ground while their horses stood patiently at one side. Old Tiofolo, the Mex vaquero, sat upright, gnarled hands clasping his knees, gazing steadily into the distance, seeing, perhaps, visions of his long past. Long Tom Oakes lay on his side, chaffing Slim Burroughs, sprawled beside him, while Pete Forrester was busily whittling a peg with a murderous looking Bowie knife.

With the exception of Tiofolo, lost in his dreams, one after the other cast furtive glances towards the silent man, immovable as a bronze statue with his fixed gaze over the prairie, and each one noticed his preoccupation, but not one showed the slightest sign of curiosity or so much as turned to look in the direction he was looking. Their indifference was more real than assumed. The hard years had taught them to take things as they came and not waste time in useless speculation over their turn. To a man, they knew that where Frank went, they would go; that what he should do, they would also do, whether it was to be weary if peaceful occupation or to face blazing guns.

They had followed him through low and high water and they would follow him to the gates of hell if he said the word. That being settled, there was nothing to be done about it until he was ready to tell them what it would be. Then they would hitch up their gun belts, slip into saddle and be off after him. Meanwhile—what the hell was there to worry about? Their philosophy was as simple as that, and their dependability a thing to be sworn by in a fickle human world.

A city dweller, if trained at all to observation, which is rare, can often tell a friend or acquaintance by his walk; but a plain's horseman can tell a rider by the way he sits and holds the saddle, his poise, how he holds his hands and head, peculiar little mannerisms in a country where all men, centaur-like, seem a part of their mounts.

Cam Sneed was still a long rifle shot away when Frank Carleton had identified him and turned his gaze away to watch unthinkingly while cowboys hazed cattle from the brush. Frank heard the pound of the racing hoofs. He knew that fate was closing in on him. He had made his tentative decision. If old Mont Jackson wanted him and his four followers, all well and good. He'd stick to the trail from which he had never deviated by a hair-breadth when comparative fortune had stood before him, waiting only for his hand to reach out and grasp it and no man the wiser; when every man in his company, from boss to lowest helper, was helping himself to the illicit gain.

It was not the law of the land, unless the custom of the majority could be called law. But it had become almost the universal habit—and who was there strong enough to oppose it? Joe Carleton had tried, and given his life in the effort;

and the lesson and the principle had sunk deep into Frank Carleton's, the son's, heart. Mont Jackson was trying it again. A useless effort, unless—Frank spurned the thought. His decision had been made.

If old Mont Jackson was too stubborn to see the end, if he was sufficient to himself in his own might, and elected to play the hand he held alone, he would be as good as finished, and again might, not right, would prevail. Then Frank Carleton, and his four faithful followers who cared only where he led, would blaze a path to hell, such a path as had never been seen in the gory history of the pioneer country.

Frank Carleton stood on the bank of his Rubicon. His die was cast, for good or bad. It waited only for old Cam Sneed to disclose its mould. Yet he waited, with impassive face, hearing the impatient hoofs drumming nearer, yet nearer, and with his look still turned aside. The pony came to a sliding stop, and Frank, perforce, had to look around.

He glanced calmly at the old puncher and got little in return. Cam's grey eyes were tented by shaggy brows, disguising both the direction of his glance and any expression they might hold. He was scowling; but Frank had seen men scowl when they had filled their hands. Cam looked off to the brush, spat once, then turned to Frank.

"Well, son," he drawled, "she done come down haids, like I said." Nothing of his momentary fears; nothing of the gigantic struggle between stubborn wills. Just the simple announcement, casually made.

And a cloud seemed to pass before Frank Carleton's eyes; he felt light, as if a burden had suddenly been taken from him. It was probably the more dangerous course, the one to which he stood committed, but he had never worried over danger before and no matter what the odds, he was still on the right side and would stay there until the finish. He turned slowly, looking casually over the four men who knew nothing of the hand that fate had played.

"Come, boys," and there was a deep, peculiar ring to his tone, "I reckon we better get to work."

They got up willingly, without question or demur. Pete Forrester put away his formidable looking knife in a special sheath he had, for it and the four turned to their horses.

"Wall, now, Frank," old Cam began, then stopped with his mouth open for the next word that didn't come. A

cowboy had broken out of the brush beyond where the steers were being herded, and was fogging his cayuse towards the little group on the knoll.

"Now what in tarnation," Cam mumbled.

The rider brought his horse to a sliding stop, his elbows going high and wide to ease the jar. He was a young lad, hardly over eighteen, but he looked like a veteran and evidently wanted to appear so. His blue eyes swept the five men quietly sitting their horses, and turned to Cam Sneed. Then his lips grinned but his eyes kept their serious expression.

"'Bout how many critters was you countin' on bein' some-ars roundabout hyar, Cam?" he asked in a slow drawl.

Cam's shaggy brows drew down in a heavy frown. He scented what lay behind this.

"Should be all o' two thousand steers," he answered slowly, "mixed in with a head o' stock cattle. Thought you was workin' on cuttin' 'em out, Walt."

"I was. Sure. But me 'n' Rip Haskell and Peeley, we sorter outrun th' rest. We was workin' into th' high ground, lookin' for stickers an' we got where we could see most of th' stuff that'd been brung in. Dunno's you know it, Cam, but Rip's a hell snorter for sizin' up herds."

He paused to swing his restive cayuse to face the group again, gentling it to stand still.

"Wall, Rip squinted for a long time, then he says there ain't more'n three quarters what there oughter be, an' Peeley, knowin' Rip don't talk to get rid o' wind, says, le's go take a look."

The young rider leaned forward to stroke the lather-flecked neck.

"Well, hell, get on with it, Walt," Cam growled.

"We rid' 'bout an hour, I reck'n, makin' it west, where we all come from with Old Mont other mornin', but criss-crossin' a good deal to cover th' country. They put me in th' middle; Rip ridin' on th' left an' Peeley out t'other side, an' comin' together ever' little while. An' all that hour we didn't see one danged critter."

Cam groaned, and the young rider glanced at him innocently.

"Then Peeley," he went on, "took a longer pasear outen his side, and bimeby I seen him fannin' it back an' when

he saw he'd got my eye he give me th' signal an' turned back. I passed it 'long to Rip an' we high tailed it after him."

"Walt," Cam said solemnly and strainedly, "there ain't no call to take us all over Texas. What th' hell did you find?"

"Peeley took us to a place where a whole lot o' cattle hadn't been grazin' but'd been driven. Rip says 'bout three, four hundred. Only way we could figger we hadn't cut th' trail before, they must've gone over that rocky ground to th' north'd hyar."

Cam Sneed swore darkly. Slim Burroughs, beside him, reached into a pocket of his saddle, took out a sizable plug and bit off a huge chew. It was Slim's habit to get himself thus provisioned when setting out for a long ride. Long Tom Oakes noticed the gesture and grinned.

"That th' end of th' hull damned story?" Cam asked.

"Not 'xactly. Rip did some ridin' 'round an' figgered 'bout ten fellers was chousin' that little bitsy herd. He 'n' Peeley took after 'em an' sent me back hyar."

Cam straightened in his saddle. His glance was roving over a busy scene spread over a wide range of country. Cowboys were hazing the wild longhorns from the timber and pushing them along to join the nucleus of the new herd where a half-dozen riders were holding them on good grazing ground. Others were cutting out the stock, the cows and calves, and sending them back to roam at will through the rough land of the outer range. The work wasn't progressing too fast; in fact, nowhere near as rapidly as Cam wanted it done. Those steers were the only things that stood between old Mont and utter ruin. Cam wanted them gathered in one solid herd where he could use all his meagre force to hold them and until that was done he was very certain he wasn't going to sleep two hours at a stretch night or day. And the thousand rescued from Shag Sanders were still scattered in a wide area that was far too close to J Bar B than was at all comforting to Cam Sneed.

He shook his grizzled head.

"Hell," he ground out between hard set teeth, "an' just when I need ever' feller an' workin' 'em too that ain't shotten too bad to fork his bronco."

"You figure they're swinging around to the north?" he heard Frank Carleton's cool voice asking the young puncher.

"Yeah, an' a lettle more to th' east, where I left 'em."

"That's beyond the J Bar B range, isn't it?"

"It tails out thataway. Peeley reck'ned if they was going to J Bar B they wouldn't a hit so much to th' west an' north first. He couldn't make it out a-tall, 'less 'n they was aimin' to come on a trail herd up a piece, but that'd be a hell of a way 'round, an' Rip told him so."

Cam was listening, with his grey eyes squinted close and his thin lips drawing into a faint grin.

"What'd you make it, around fifteen miles?"

"Nigher twenty. I come straight, over hill an' *resaca*, but we followed 'em a long time 'fore I turned back. They 'peared to be headin' 'long towards one o' them draws in th' low hills what feed Little River where she's a brook. They was in flat country then with a lot o' swales 'n both sides."

His glance fell to the carbine butt protruding from Frank's saddle scabbard. He nodded, then frowned.

"Huh?" Frank asked.

"Like I said," the young puncher explained, "I come straight. I was toppin' one of th' first low ridges an' I heerd some shootin'. I kinder figgered no pistol shot would carry that far."

Slim Burroughs spat a long, brown stream. He swallowed once, and his Adam's apple jerked up and down.

"Son," he said in his soft drawl, "ever hear th' story of th' feller told th' boss when he come back from th' mountings how sorry he was he'd had to use up all th' water in th' well?"

"No, I don't reck'n I ever did hear that one, Mister," Walt answered warily.

"Come a night o' winter," Slim said soberly, "when we ain't got nothin' to do till mornin' an' mebbe I'll tell it to you. It's one you sure oughter have in your repert'ry."

Tiofolo, the old vaquero, had moved his mount colser into the group.

"Mebbe some maverick in three, four hundred, not?" he asked quietly.

Frank glanced at him quickly. Already the wise old Mex had spotted something.

Frank smiled at his serious young face.

"Always obey commands and you won't have anything to regret."

"Thanks, Mister. I didn't jus' know——" He wheeled his horse abruptly on the back trail.

The five pounded on, up hill and down, skirting the worst of the going, sure to pick up their true course beyond. Frank Carleton was the only one with serious face. He was thinking less of the task immediately before him, although that was almost certain to be negotiated with smoking guns, than he was concerned with the larger problem beyond it on which he was now definitely embarked.

Before this, he had done what he could alone to instil regard for the property rights of others and had set an example by his own rigorous behaviour. But the effect of his work had amounted to little. He couldn't persuade handlers of the big trail-herds to forgo the illicit profit that was handed to them at almost every stage of their long drives, with no effort on their part and little if any chance of reprisals. There had been no opportunity to go among the ranchmen and encourage them to organize against the common plundering system. He had not been exactly a bystander, but he had not been called upon to bear the brunt of the thievery snice the one big blow that had robbed him of parent and home.

So far, with the exception of helping Mont Jackson cut the trail-herd for his rustled property and his walk-out from Candley's crooked employment, he had not been directly in the fight and even in the former affair he had not been affiliated with the M J spread as a recognized part of an outfit that had the courage to make their protest with flaming guns. Now he was a part of it, and a thrill he hadn't felt for many years coursed through his veins.

It was the fight his father had attempted and lost. And now it was his turn, and win or lose, a whole lot of people would know that he had been in it and given his best. He didn't want to lose. He wasn't getting into it to lose. This thing had to be set right, and with old Mont Jackson temporarily out of the fighting, it seemed as if the burden of strategy, if not of conflict, was setting on Frank Carleton's broad shoulders.

The first point, as Frank saw it, was to bolster Jackson's financial position. That means gathering his available beef

steers and holding them intact for the first honest buyer. The number Walt and his companions had estimated now being taken and which Frank and his four stalwarts were out to recover, would not make or break the old rancher, but it was a beginning and a most harrassing one, and had to be stopped. Moreover, if things broke right, Frank was determined to make certain people realize that it had become highly dangerous to interfere in the affairs of Mont Jackson's spread.

Frank had made a shrewd guess of what was passing in wise old Tiofolo's mind. The wrinkled vaquero was well versed in the wiles of men, and if it should prove that he had put a finger on the rustlers' plans, Frank would have them just where he wanted them, the open violators of the oldest law of the range.

Three of the men riding close behind where Carleton led, had nothing of his seriousness in their weather-tanned faces. Tiofolo would always look the same. At times and on special occasions in the thick of battle a gleam would come into his dark eyes, but his other features were as easy to read as a washboard. Slim, Long Tom Oakes and Pete were different. Just now they were grinning like boys on a lark. To look at them, one would hardly suspect they were as hard and tough in a fight as old Tiofolo himself.

The swift, steady pace had left a good deal of country behind them. The sun was getting low, but the last ridge lay before them. Once over that and they would lope down into the flatland which again would give to rising ground, the foothills and the draws that cut between. Frank had already picked out the knobbly hill, which Walt had described, from a rise further back and found that their course scarcely had to be altered at all. They had come straight as the flight of a buzzard to the feast in spite of the many short detours around jutting spurs and deep *resacas*. Frank was in haste to get to the tracking while daylight was still with them. Tiofolo had others ideas.

They crossed a gully. The slope before them was in full shadow while that they had just raced down was bathed in the level rays of the sinking sun. Frank put his horse at the rising ground and was about to touch the heaving flanks when Tiofolo ranged beside him and laid a hand on his arm.

"Go faster, no hurry," Tiofolo said.

Frank glanced at him keenly.

"You've got something on your mind, old fellow," Frank said. "What is it?"

Without a word, Tiofolo pulled down to a walk. Frank promptly reined in and raised a hand to the men behind. Tiofolo at once took the lead and angled off to their left to make the top of the rise. Nearing it, he signed to the others to wait and went up alone. They could see his head move slowly as he viewed the country before him. Then, with hardly a pause, he retraced his steps a short distance, turned more to the left and gave a wide sweep of his arm in that direction. They moved after him at the pace he set.

A little later, he turned again and headed straight over the ridge and they pressed their broncs to join him. As they passed the crest they found themselves sheltered by a strip of timber running far out in the plain and angling towards the foothills beyond. Here Tiofolo picked up speed and the five rode bunched close together. As Carleton came up beside him, the vaquero raised an arm behind him and to his right.

"Sun, she bright," was his laconic comment.

Frank turned his head. The last rays touched the ridge near the top although lower down the shadows had gathered.

"You think they got a watcher?" Frank asked. "Then where would Rip Haskell and Peeley be?"

"*Quien sabe*?" was all Tiofolo's answer to both questions as he pressed on.

They drew near the last of the timber strip, which ended in a straggly point, with the swift twilight around them. Without having to leave the cover, they found a dip in the prairie, close by the edge of the trees, with a small spring near the bottom, whose thin stream trickled off into the swale below. Here Tiofolo called a halt, although he still sat his horse while the other four swung from their saddles.

"Come on with your chuck wagon," Slim called to him, loosening the cinch on his rangy bay. "Let's see how you boardin' us."

Tiofolo opened the flaps of his saddle-bags, reached in and produced, one after the other, a slab of bacon, a sack of flour, and several smaller sacks of coffee, sugar and dried fruit. He handed them over to Slim who was watching him with one eye cocked. Twisting in his saddle, Tiofolo unfastened slicker and blanket from the cantle, unrolled them on one knee and passed out a frying pan and a shallow tin vessel.

"You got coffee pot, Slim," he said. "You do um. Tiofolo take *poco pasear.*"

"You want to go alone?" Frank asked him, who had been taking it all in while pretending to look over the camping ground.

"One see like two," Tiofolo told him. He tossed his roll to the ground at one side, jerked his head a little to Frank and moved ahead. Frank tossed his reins to Long Tom Oakes, who was the nearest, and walked beside Tiofolo to the point of the timber.

There Tiofolo stopped and pointed an arm ahead. The plain immediately before them was cast in deep shadow but not far beyond where they stood they could make out the rugged outline of a low hill that marked the beginning of a ridge running far away into the darkness. At its left was the wide mouth of a draw flanked on the other side by another ridge smoother in outline.

Frank nodded. Tiofolo lifted the reins and was soon an indistinct blur in the gloom. Frank watched him for a while, nothing that he swung off first to the left whereas the mouth of the draw was further along in the other direction. He lost horse and rider when they appeared to be only half-way to the rising ground beyond, and turned back to the camp.

No orders were given; no one man lolled aside while others did the necessary work. Slim was busy at the spring mixing a batch of biscuits in the frying pan which later he would transfer to the baking pan. Long Tom was acting as wrangler, putting hobbles on the horses and leading one after the other to the swale where Pete Forrester had scooped out a little basin, with the broad blade of his bowie knife, that was filling rapidly with the cold water of the spring. Even without the hobbles, the broncs were not apt to range far; not with that fresh water and the lush grass of the swale.

Frank Carleton had stepped into the timber and soon came back with an armful of dry sticks that would give plenty of heat without smoke. When the fire was laid and lighted, it was below the rim of the dip and except for the glow of the little flames would not be seen at any distance. Not that any one of the four expected any prowlers within miles. It was just a fixed habit of precaution that had become second nature through the long, hard years.

Frank set the saddles in a semi-circle back from the blaze which Slim was keeping down to mere cooking requirements. He then placed the blanket rolls by the hulls and, having nothing else to do, pulled out a sack of tobacco and paper and began to build himself a smoke. Long Tom and Pete Forrester wandered up from the swale, hunkered down by the fire and started rolling their own.

Oakes passed his first one over to Slim Burroughs who had got his biscuits in the tin which he set on a slant to catch all of the heat evenly. He picked up an ember, got his smoke going, with a nod to Long Tom, then set the coffee pot on the red coals and started to slice the bacon.

"Tom," Pete Forrester drawled. "Better keep yore eye on them biscuits. Cookin' just ain't Slim's specialty, and a couple things is a leetle too much for him."

"You tech them biscuits," Slim growled, "an' you don't get none of 'em."

"Waal," Pete teased him, "I dunno's I'd mind if they goin' to be burnt to a crisp."

Frank grinned. This was like old times. He felt strangely light-hearted. There was no crooked trail-boss over him now; no fear that each day would bring some new thievery to the outfit with which he was forced to work or starve. The world stood clean before him, at least where his path led. He was embarked on a fight; he made no doubt of that, but it was a battle where all his inherited principles were at stake, and he was ready for it.

Slim turned the crisping bacon over with the point of his knife, then raised his head and bent an ear in the direction Tiofolo had gone.

"'Bout time that feller was back, ain't it?" he asked no one in particular.

"Yeah," Long Tom told him. "He shoulda been back long time ago if we goin' to get any grub."

"S'pose you stretch them long laigs o' yours, Tom," the cook informed him, "an' set that coffee back. B'iled enuff. An', Pete, you c'n shift them biscuits. Never did see a finer pan o' sourdough an' I'd hate to sp'ile a good mess like that."

Frank, who was the only one erect, was the first to hear the clop-clop of hoofs drawing nearer, but he did not turn. Then old Tiofolo rode over an end of the dip towards the

swale and swung down, and almost with the same motion slipped the hull off the tired bronc. Long Tom rose to his rangy height and tossed over to him the hobbles he had made ready. Tiofolo took his time, letting the horse get his drink at Pete's basin and seeing him step haltingly off to graze, then he came back to the fire with the bridle which he tossed to his saddle and roll.

He sniffed at the bacon, bent down to glance at the biscuits and a smile almost, almost broke the wrinkles of his weathered face.

"Right good job, Slim," he praised. "I t'ink you be cook now."

"No he don't, by a damned sight," Pete protested. "You ol' bogger, you don't care what you eat, but you don't want th' rest of us to starve, do you?"

Each man had his plate and cup. They sat in a close circle with bacon, biscuit and coffee in the middle. They tried to make Slim serve them but he only helped himself and left them to do what they pleased about it, and they weren't long in doing that. No one asked Tiofolo a question, although each knew that the old scout's return at that time meant he had not come back empty handed. He could have covered a lot of ground in his thirty or forty minutes' absence, and their keen glances had told them that the cayuse had not done much walking on Tiofolo's little *pasear*. They would get such information as he would want to give them in all good time; meanwhile they acted as if not in the least concerned about it and had nothing at all on their minds except to get rid of the frugal meal Slim had prepared for them.

With the last biscuit sopped in the bacon grease, Tiofolo took a long swallow of black coffee and set the cup gingerly beside him. He saw Frank's eyes on him and he nodded his head briefly.

"They go up that draw," he said, relapsing into his native tongue for more rapid speech. "They came from the west, around this strip of timber, then straight up the draw. And there were plenty men with them for they drove fast, keeping them on the run for a long way."

The other men had set their cups to cool also, making up their smokes with their eyes carefully on their work but listening intently to the old Mex vaquero.

"How far d'you go?" Frank asked.

"It is a funny thing," Tiofolo said. "I think there must be a good pass through the ridges, for I find where they turn straight east and leave the draw. And not one stray stay behind."

"Any idea what the country might be like ahead of them?" Frank asked, frowning over the strange puzzle. He himself had a general notion of the territory around the head waters of Little River, especially so far from the valley of the main stream, and he knew that it was the last place in the world to drive cattle with the expectation of keeping them there unless—it was the purpose to lose them altogether.

Of course there would be some narrow places where meagre grazing could be found, but not for four hundred steers and stock. It was wild country up there, wild and broken, rising steadily through the foothills to the low range beyond. Frank's first thought had been that the rustlers had cut off a portion of the prime herd for their own ultimate gain, having seen a chance to push the beef steers over into other territory where they could be slipped, possibly, into Candley's trail-herd farther north or held safe from their home range until another trailer should come along. Now he was not so cetain of that. It began to take the aspects of pure revenge.

The J Bar B range lay off to the right of where they were now encamped; that is, to the east and south-east, then running due South from the home ranch until it struck the M J line and extending farther to the east in the valley. The rugged wasteland to the north and north-west was out of their territory. Of course at times some of their own stock could have wandered up the inviting draws and in all probability J Bar B riders had hunted over that hilly country and knew it like a book. Undoubtedly they knew exactly where they could scatter Mont Jackson's four hundred beeves so that it would be an almost hopeless task to recover many of them and where the most would likely perish in hard weather.

These thoughts flashed through Frank Carleton's mind and his lips drew into a hard line as he waited Tiofolo's slow answer.

"I make pretty good guess," the vaquero said quietly, and Frank knew that was all he would say until he should have an opportunity to confirm it. A hard light grew in Frank's dark eyes. If this was the kind of game Bank's men were up to some of them would pap for it dearly.

"See anything of Rip Haskell and Peeley?" he asked. This was the question every man there had been waiting for. They knew the men only as riders of the spread to which they were now attached, but that was enough. Of course the two punchers could have passed them in that wide country if they had taken another and easier way back to the Mary Jane; then, they could have gone on farther and be hanging on to the tail of the rustler band.

Tiofolo nodded. There was no expression on his poker face.

"'Bout a mile up the draw."

"Shot?"

Tiofolo nodded again.

"Both were together, no more 'n ten feet apart. Right 'longside of 'em was a scatterin' of big boulders."

"Dry gulched?" Frank shot at him.

Tiofolo nodded a third time.

Frank came to his feet. His nostrils were distended a little. That and the grim look in his eyes were the only signs he gave of the anger raging within him. He stood for a moment, considering, checking time.

"How far would you set their camp, Tiofolo?" he asked.

The old vaquero lifted his cup and drained it before setting it down. He glanced over at Slim Burroughs.

"You use too much," he said, "an' boil too long. You no settle when ready."

He turned to Frank and shook his head.

"Tiofolo know somet'ing better. We wait see."

Frank was burning with impatience but he was also wise. Besides he knew the old vaquero from long experience. Never would he tell a thing, never would he advise unless in his own mind he was sure. Many's the time Frank had known the wily old fellow to outsmart and outguess the shrewdest not only of his own race but Americans as well. Give him the set-up and the general lay of the land, let him see the course his antagonist had started on and he seemed to have the uncanny faculty of getting into the other man's mind and knowing exactly what he would do and where he would turn up at a given time. And Tiofolo would be right there to meet him.

Slim Burroughs, Long Tom and Pete Forrester were no slouches; as keen trailers, straight shooters and hard fighters

as any spread, crooked trail-drive, or dark saloon for that matter, in the wide Texas country could boast. But Tiofolo was known far and wide as the cleverest *hombre* of the ranges. Men who had met him before and lived to tell about it, let him strictly alone. They felt safe that way, for the old Mex vaquero, through his long life, had never been in a quarrel of his own making, had never set out to get a man unless that man had threatened the welfare of people to whom Tiofolo was loyal.

Frank turned slowly, walked to the rim of the dip, gazed over the wide, silent flatlands vague and mysterious under the star shine, then unobtrusively looked back at the men. He didn't expect to get any indication of what was on Tiofolo's mind by merely watching him; yet it steadied his racing thoughts just to observe the old fellow's equanimity and his exhaustless patience.

Frank's blood was hot, inflamed by the theft of the cattle and now the wanton, treacherous murder of the two riders. Ten years earlier, regadless of wiser heads, he would have mounted and driven headlong to wipe out the score at the earliest possible moment. But he had learned to master his impetuous temper, at least to the degree where he didn't close his ears entirely to cooler judgment. The old Mexican was a grand lesson to him.

Frank was as certain that Tiofolo would exact the full penalty as he was of his own purpose to drive home a lesson that would outlast the present struggle; possibly Tiofolo's punishment would be the fuller, for while Frank would strike in the heat of his anger, the old Mex would take his time, study the situation, get his men where he wanted them, then deliver the execution without mercy.

Yet, knowing this, Frank constantly wondered at the seasoned vaquero's placidity. On an earlier, somewhat similar situation, forced to wait at a point of vantage that brought a far outnumbering force to more even terms, Frank had suspected that Tiofolo was growing old, losing fire and spirit with the advancing years, yielding the Texan's unconquerable pride, in striking back when hurt, to the more submissive characteristics of his race. Then when action broke, he was amazed at Tiofolo's unleashed ferocity and understood better the white heat of his emotions under their calm exterior.

And now, the old vaquero was quietly sifting flour into the pan, mixing it with deft fingers that had not yet lost their suppleness, adding a measure of wood ashes for leavening and setting it aside for the fire that would long precede daylight. That chore done, he strolled over where he could see the little *remuda* in the swale; then, satisfied, returned, spread out his blanket and curled up for what few hours of sleep he would allow himself.

Meanwhile, by the light of a few extra sticks on the dying embers, Slim and Long Tom had taken their Winchesters from the scabbards and were cleaning and oiling them, afterwards making sure that magazine and chamber were filled. Pete Forrester had spent less time on his rifle and was busily whetting out the knicks his basin-scoping might have produced on the razor-like edge of his Bowie. When not anticipating immediate action, Pete carried the formidable knife concealed beneath the waistband of his trousers. In the morning it would be slung between his shoulder blades with the hilt at the tip of his neck, a trick he had picked up from a Louisianan; and what Pete couldn't do with that knife, either in his sinewy hand or cast from it, no other fancier of the weapon would even try.

Frank watched the three roll in, settle once and lie motionless. No problems vexed or harassed them. What the morrow would bring them they would learn—on the morrow. No amount of worrying would sooner discover or hasten it. It was a simple code of life, and it conserved energy.

The snap and crackle of burning sticks brought Frank Carleton awake and instantly alert. Tiofolo was crouched over the small, hot blaze, like a witch above her cauldron, his seamed face, like old leather, insensible to the heat, eyes unblinking in the thin smoke that drifted about him.

"Now, that's real coffee," came in a slow drawl from one of the blanket rolls and Long Tom elongated himself to upright attitude.

"Yeah," Pete agreed, "an' best part of it is we don't have to wait all day to git it."

A saddle hit him amidships as Slim erupted from his roll.

The stars were as bright as at midnight; not a vestige of light showed in the east. It was hazy over there where a

light mist hung above the lower land but off towards the foot-hills it was crystal clear.

They rode from the dip in darkness and came to the wide mouth of the draw in the twilight of early morning. Tiofolo pointed to the scarred earth, as he rode beside Frank Carleton at the head of the little cavalcade.

"All on the run," he said, "as if the devil was chasing them, and now two nights old."

"Huh. That means——"

"*Si.* It would take time for what they had in mind to do."

"Then they have a big start on us."

"They could still send men back to watch. They are not too far."

Frank shook his head.

"It will be hard to surprise them; they will still have men at the tail."

Tiofolo's lips twisted grimly.

"They have big surprise. You see."

They had penetrated a mile up the draw and Frank was scanning the ground before them. Tiofolo read his thought. A little further on, at a ponit where the side hills drew closer together, he swerved his horse towards the right-hand bank where were a number of large boulders. As they came close they made out two motionless foms on the tops of the largest.

"More I could not do last night," Tiofolo said, and Frank understood.

"We can't take time now," Frank said.

"Slim, Tom an' Pete have time," Tiofolo hold him. "We come back."

Without a word, the three punchers swung down and set to work to construct a cairn of rocks which no prowling beast could disturb. Frank knew no more than they what was in Tiofolo's mind, but he followed as the vaquero pressed his horse on.

Some time later, in the grey light of coming day, Frank saw the scuffed trail they were following swung abruptly from the main draw into a branch that angled more to the eastward. It was narrow and winding, flanked at both sides by brush-covered slopes, and as they progressed it turned even further in the easterly direction. Tiofolo had moderate their fast pace to an easy lope and after no more than a mile he slowed this

to a walk, as they approached a rocky spur that seemed to make a corner in the trail. Here Tiofolo raised a hand to Frank who stopped while the old vaquero pushed on to the point and peered cautiously around. In a moment he signed to Frank who spurred forward.

From where they sat their horses the trail began to broaden to form a basin a half-mile further on, and there a great mass of cattle were gathered, already starting to move restlessly. They could hear the faint lowing, now and then a bellow that echoed hollowly as it was buffeted back and forth from the high, surrounding walls. Against the dusty haze, raised by the moving hoofs, they made out a single horseman riding slowly from side to side of the basin. At the right and apparently opposite the middle of the herd, were flickering points of lgiht from a fire that seemed uncommonly large for mere cooking purposes.

Frank frowned at that and reached over a hand to loosen the Winchester in its scabbard. Then his eyes searched the defile between them and the basin for cover that would screen their approach, and he frowned at that too. A man would have to crawl along one of the wide banks to get there unnoticed.

"The surprise will not come from here, *señor* Frank," Tiofolo said coolly.

He swung his horse around back of the rocky point, dismounting and handed the reins to Frank. Evidently he didn't want the cayuse to get a notion he could move sidewise with hanging leather enough to be seen in the opening by some alert eye. On foot, the vaquero crossed the passage and climbed a short distance up the opposite bank. When he returned in a couple of minutes his face was as near smiling as it ever had been.

"Come," he said. "We go fast. Tiofolo sure now."

"Suppose you tell me what the mystery is," Frank suggested, after they had loped a short distance and then, safe from sight or sound, put their horses to a run.

"Did Tiofolo ever fool you, *señor* Frank?" the old vaquero asked. He appeared to be getting a good deal of amusement out of the situation, but Frank knew that it was grim humour. He hadn't forgotten thost two murdered punchers whose bodies he had carried and with the exercise

of unbelievable strength had hoisted to places of safety away from the ravages of wild animals.

"No; never," Frank told him seriously. He was back with the old punchers of boyhood days again. What if bloody days lay before them; they would face them together with warm memories knitting them close.

"Then leave him to me," and Tiofolo would say no more.

Pete, Slim and Long Tom had finished their work and when they saw the fast pace at which the two were approaching, swung aboard their hulls and set their broncos in motion. Frank and Tiofolo swept past them and they pressed spurs to match their speed. At the mouth of the draw, the old vaquero, hugging the left bank as they rode, took a wide curve in that direction that kept them in the more even going of the flatlands where they were not obliged to slacken their pace.

Ahead, a long low ridge cut out from the high country into the plain. Tiofolo picked a cut in the saddle-back and headed for it, and when they came to it they found the ascent easy, with little brush to impede their progress. As they neared the crest, Frank, watching Tiofolo who was in the lead, saw him gaze eagerly off to his left; then his shoulders eased and he turned in the other direction to give a long, searching, sweeping look. A moment later, he raised his hand to signal the others on and put his cayuse to reckless speed down the sandy slope.

Frank, coming next, turned his head as the vaquero had done and was rewarded by the sight of another draw that might have been a twin to the first. He was not greatly surprised as he had reasoned that only a second passage from the basin could explain Tiofolo's action. He turned now to look to his right with greater understanding. Extending far from him to the eastward was a slightly rolling country dipping from his sight at a considerable distance towards what should be the Little River Valley. He knew at once that he was gazing at the extreme westerly portion of the J Bar B range, and as Tiofolo had done, he studied it carefully for any sign of man or beast. Far away, his keen eyes picked out a few blots showing in the risen sun against the dull background of the prairie which he identified instantly as strays. Of horsemen there was none, and in view of what was happening in the basin in the hills, Frank judged that the other riders of the

spread would make their presence known on quite the opposite side of the broad range.

He pressed after Tiofolo, and the three grizzled punchers followed at the flying heels of the day.

Tiofolo led the way into the mouth of the draw and didn't slacken speed until the passage had narrowed and he came to a bend with a clear view of a few hundred yards ahead where the defile again twisted, but this time in the other direction which was toward the north-west and the position where the basin should be located. At this spot, where Tiofolo drew rein, a low, narrow ridge thrust its point well out into the draw, gaining height where it ran upward to join the right bank. Clothed with a few scrub oaks and aspen, it made a little bay with its middle portion above a man on horseback, tapering down to only a few feet in height with scattered small bolders fringing its outer end. The old vaquero's eyes gleamed as he looked it over. It might not be as far up the draw as he could wish but it seemed made to order for what he had in mind.

Frank was frowning a little as he watched Tiofolo. It had been in his mind to push straight through to the basin and make a fight of it there, trusting that the herded cattle would block the rustlers from any easy escape in the other direction, and he was not altogether pleased when Tiofolo pulled rein and began to look the place over.

"You wait here," Tiofolo told him. "Tiofolo go see."

"How far do you make it?" he asked the vaquero.

"One mile, mebbe two."

"Then suppose we all go. No sense in splitting now."

Tiofolo gauged the height of the sun. They were in shadow from the right bank where they sat their horses in the little bay but would not be for long as the rays struck the bottom of the draw a hundred yards or so before them.

"Not ready yet," he said. "You see."

A low comment from Slim Burroughs drew his attention. Frank turned too. A short way further up the draw a well-grown calf had just emerged from the brush on the opposite bank. As they watched, the animal trotted out a few steps, then stopped and swept its flank with its muzzle. Then it galloped a few paces, stopped again with another backward sweep of its head and put its nose down to sniff for grass.

Tiofolo sent a swift glance up the draw where no still or moving form was to be seen.

"Slim," he said. "You go bring him, show *señor* Frank."

The slender rider sent his pinto with a rush from behind the point out across the bottom of the draw, uncoiling his riata as he rode and spinning out the loop. He swept in a circle behind the calf which took fright, straining for his freedom in a clumsy run. Slim hazed it across the draw towards the point, his loop constantly in the air, circling his head. As it came abreast of the little group of watchers, the rope settled gracefully down and Slim dumped the animal at the horses feet. The four men swung from their saddles to look.

On the brown flank, scorching hair and flesh, was a freshly burned mark, the brand of the J Bar B.

Dull red mottled the tanned cheeks of the five men staring at this outlawry of all rangelands. Long Tom Oakes swore deep in his throat. Pete Forrester spat on the ground, then was in his saddle as nimbly as a kitten, waiting the word to go. Old Tiofolo was regarding Frank Carleton with a peculiar gleam in his black eyes.

"You knew it," Frank said to him, "from away back, when you asked Walt about the mavericks."

"It'ink," old Tiofolo said slowly, "what he must have in his mind. No sense rustle stock cattle so far off range." He pointed to the animal, then swept his arm in a wide gesture, indicating the further draw, the basin, the passage where they now stood and the range behind them. "Now we know what he do."

"Yes, we know," Frank said grimly.

"So, Tiofolo go now and see."

"You be damned careful," Frank told him.

It was no secret to him what was in the old vaquero's mind. It couldn't be better, if they wanted to take full toll, and Frank did. The only thing he did not approve of in the arrangements was the danger the faithful old fellow would run, but this was no time for regrets or splitting hairs. Of all of them, none could compare with Tiofolo in craftiness, shrewd, cold judgment and desperate resource. They would not allow him anything in courage, but something more was required now and besides they would have plenty of chance to

exercise that if Rip Haskell's estimate of ten men should prove correct.

"I t'ink," Tiofolo said calmly, "the broncos would be better there," he pointed deep into the little bay, "an' you-all there." He indicated the outer end of the little ridge, and without waiting to see if his advice was followed, he dug heels into his mount and went in a smooth run up the draw,

The four who were left, fastened their horses in the small growth close against the bank, slipped Winchesters from scabbards and looked for favourable positions along the rim of the low ridge. Long Tom Oakes took his standing, the nearest to the bank, and Frank chose to do likewise beside him, while Slim Burroughs found a convenient place to kneel, tested his range by a quick aim covering the full reach of the draw before him, then settled his back against a small boulder, pulled the hat-brim over his eyes and pretended to doze. Pete was the furthest into the draw with a couple of adjacent if small boulders affording him a notch for his rifle. He was sprawled at full length but he, as well as the others, were too experienced to risk overshooting by resting their barrels on a solid base. Off-hand shooting they had been trained to, and up to date it had been good enough for them.

Time dragged slowly, measured by the advance of the rays towards them as the sun rose over the ridge. Slim was wide awake now, watching the calf he had loosed. Long Tom was lying against the slope, looking through the stunted scrub he had elected to get behind and which would afford no protection against bullets but was a screen for his bushy black hair. Frank could hear his heavy, regular breathing, as steady and unruffled as the whir of machinery. A low remark from him came just as Frank also saw what had caught his attention.

At the far turn a cow and two calves were rounding into the draw, coming at unhurried pace; the youngsters frisking ahead to stand on awkward legs until their slower parent should catch up with them. It was a peaceful, quiet scene. They came on steadily for fifty yards when, one after the other, four longhorns came around the bend. They, too, appeared unhurried but were heading definitely for the grazing in the flatlands.

"I don't savvy that," Long Tom growled.

"Must've broke away," Frank was answering when three faint, spaced reports came down the clear air.

"There goes old T'ofolo's stick inter th' hornet's nest," Slim Burroughs remarked. He moved lazily to a sitting position from which he could switch in the flash of an eye to his knees.

Another report sounded, another; then a confused burst of several rifles, a short silence then a single shot.

"That last was T'ofolo's," Pete Forrester declared. "I reck'n I know how his old Betty speaks. Anyways, they didn't get him on that bu'st."

Frank suddenly whirled from his stand, ran to the bay, loosed him with a flick of the hand and was in the saddle with the rifle cradled over his arm.

"Hold it," he called to the three men. "He may need help at the bend." The bay came down on all four feet, bunched his muscles and was off like a streak of light as Frank pressed the spurs. He skirted the stock animals and swept wide of the longhorns, then headed for the left side of the draw to come to the bend there.

"Damned loco," Slim growled.

"Jus' like his father," Long Tom added. "Never would let a man o' his get in a ruckus 'thout takin' a hand."

"Why'n hell didn't he let one of us no count fellers go?"

More reports were punctuating their talk and were growing sensibly louder but they seemed little concerned over that fact with the eyes of all three fixed on Frank Carleton. They saw him draw close to the bend, pull reins suddenly, then lean far from his saddle to peer around. For a long moment he held that pose while shot after shot stabbed the silence. Then, abruptly, the bay's head came around and, belly to ground, he came pounding back.

"'Bout time," Slim growled and got over to his knees. Frank raced past the longhorns stirring them into a trot although they were still a matter of a couple of hundred yards from the little ridge. On came Frank. He was fifty yards away when a louder shot blasted by the far bend and old Tiofolo, nose to horse's neck, streaked into view. Frank swept around the point, and with the loss only of a second or two, threw himself frm the saddle, twisted a rein around the stem of an ash and was again beside Long Tom.

"Don't know whether he's been hit or not," he said to Oakes.

"He's still got his gun," Long Tom grunted.

"He 'll bet too much on that old cayuse some day," Pete Forrester growled. "Mighty close on his heels, weren't they, Frank?"

"Too close, Frank answered as another horseman swept into view, and the freshness and speed of his mount was soon in evidence. A second was almost on his heel and a third flashed into view as the first rider raised his rifle and let go.

"Lookit, th' ol' sonufagun," Slim Burroughs said for the first time without his drawl. "Damned if he ain't slowin' her down, else she's got winged or 's blowed." Tiofolo still rode with his wiry body bent close over the saddle-horn. His pony wasn't running in a straight line. It was weaving a little in its stride but its pace so far was unbroken. Tiofolo was still a hundred yards away and his pursuers were scarcely more than that behind him. Suddenly he twisted in his seat, raised the rifle with one hand and let a shot go. And Slim Burroughs crowed with delight.

The shots, the pounding hoofs started the longhorns off, tails up, lumbering into a fast run and breaking right before Tiofolo's horse. It was too late for him to turn. From the ridge it seemed as if he could not possibly escape those long spikes but through some wizardry of horsemanhip he managed it. He tore now directly for the point of the ridge, and apparently guessing he was set for a last stand, a yell came hurtling down the draw where now three more riders were pounding.

"I'll take number one," Pete Forrester announced coolly. "Dammit, I got me a hell of a place. He's all I c'n see good."

"Next's mine," Slim added.

"I'll take three and you four, Tom," Frank said. "We'll wait for you, Pete."

"Sure. Sure. Wait 'll you c'n see th' whites of their eyes, some booger said. Hell!" he added suddenly. "My man's got longhorns. All I c'n see."

Tiofolo swept in around behind them. They heard the scuffing of sharply checked hoofs, the light thud of human feet hitting the ground, but no man could spare time to glance

round. Wounded or not, the old Mex would have to take care of himself in the next few moments.

Pete Forrester was cursing steadily. He knew the rustlers were coming close upon them and that his companions were waiting for his shot, but only a shaggy form with wide-spread horns filled his sights. He groaned and was about to jump up but the steer was too close now. Then the animal, crowded by its nearest companion, left the ground in a big leap plumb over Pete's two boulders. But in that moment when the veiw was cleared before him, Pete's rifle crashed and the foremost rider, hardly more than thirty yards from his rifle muzzle, threw his arms into the air and was thrown backward.

At the same instant, three other rifles spanged out their deadly missiles, and two more riders slumped from their saddles, never to ride again. The third reeled in his saddle, clinging desperately to the horn, swerving his horse to one side. Then a fifth rifle roared just above Slim Burroughs' head and that rider's fight was over.

Old Tiofolo crouched low behind the ridge while his fingers coolly slipped more cartridges into the magazine of his hot rifle. Blood dripped steadily from his left wrist but he shook it off as he worked the lever. Pete Forrester had turned his head and was looking curiously behind him at the tail end of the longhorn disappearing down the draw. Then he gazed at one big print square between his boots.

"I'll be teetotally danged!" he murmured and faced front again.

But the others weren't idle. Five more riders Frank counted in the draw from a hundred yards back to the bend, while his rifle, like those of Slim and Long Tom, was roaring steadily. One or more of those five had been hit but they were still riding, and now they had swerved at that unexpected reception and were streaking it for the opposite side of the draw where a large boulder and a jut in the bank gave a suggestion of cover.

A moment more and all five had made it. But apparently the cover such as it was proved insufficient for both horses and men. One cayuse, riderless, came into view and went dashing back up the draw; a second and a third followed. But the men crouched behind the little ridge no longer counted horses. A hail of bullets was whining around them, spatter-

ing against Pete's boulders, splashing sand into the faces of Frank and Long Tom and thudding into the bank.

Splintering lead gashed Pete's exposed leg; another slug cut the flesh of Slim's left arm, and both punchers left their positions to crawl back of Long Tom who, with Frank, was keeping up his steady firing. But targets were hard to see. Apparently the rustlers were shooting from behind rocks screened from the M J men by the scrub and brush before it, but giving them a clear sight of the men behind the little ridge. It was becoming evident that with this new order of battle the latter had the worst picking.

"Slim." That was old Tiofolo's cool voice. "You'n' Pete go crawl up th' side here. Good cover. Don't shoot till you get where you see sun. *Señor* Frank, I t'ing you 'n' Tom look after horses. We get um."

Frank ducked down to refill his magazine and took the opportunity to have a look at old Tiofolo. Blood was trickling down one weathered cheek from a crease at the temple, but a steadier stream showed at the wrist from his gashed upper arm. Frank snapped a cartridge into the chamber, laid the rifle down, then whipped out a bandanna and in spite of his protests bound it tightly around Tiofolo's wounded arm.

"Keep your shots going, Tom," he called over his shoulder. "Be with you in a second," he added, drawing the knot hard.

Long Tom grunted, but whether in assent or at the bullet that flicked his shoulder no one could tell. And the enemy bullets were searching them closely. Abruptly one of the horses jumped, kicking out wildly where a bullet had skittered off the boulder Pete had recently quit and struck it in the rump. Frank stepped back.

"That fix heem," Tiofolo said by way of thanks.

Slim and Pete Forrester had disappeared and Frank had no time to look for them. Encouraged by the lessened fire, for Long Tom was sparing of the last cartridge in his rifle, the storm of bullets increased. Frank stooped, grasped his rifle, peered a moment to locate the flash of rifles, for that was all he could make out, then pumped four fast shots into the smoke-filled cover. Then he began to space his shots, waiting for Long Tom Oakes to reload; and between his shots he heard abruptly the pound of racing hoofs behind him. He shot again, ducked and sent a quick glance over his shoulder.

Old Tiofolo, flat on his cayuse's neck, was tearing towards the mouth of the draw. Frank grinned as he went into action once more. Tiofolo was still largely in that fight in spite of his crease and badly hit arm. Frank knew what the wily vaquero was up to. He'd seen him angling towards the opposite side of the draw, and although he had drawn fire in his mad dash, in that brief glance Frank had taken, neither horse nor man appeared to have been hit. But now he had his own work out out for him, with only two rifles for the time being, to keep five at bay better sheltered on the opposite bank.

And soon he had evidence that a flanking strategy was not confined to his side of the open draw. A puff of smoke had come from the side of the hill further along the mouth which meant that Frank and Long Tom were becoming exposed to one rifle at least; and where one had gone others could follow. Then another shot came from the same position and whereas the first had whizzed harmlessly by, the second seared Frank's left side and barely passed over Long Tom's bushy head where he was crouched ramming cartridges home.

"Take the boulder, Tom," Frank told him, as he twisted a little further against the bank and brought his rifle around. Then he saw that by stooping and moving a little forward, he would get at least partial shelter from the new marksman by a rock jutting from the side of the low ridge. He crouched quickly on the thought and a bullet cut through the crown of his sombrero.

Then Frank rose up. The butt flashed to his shoulder. A mere fraction of a second to steady his aim and the rifle crashed. He stooped, moved forward to the rock which only partly shielded him, and waited with the rifle at his shoulder. No other shot came from that particular spot, but another rifle spurted flame half-way between it and the boulder where a second man was getting into better position, and the wind of that bullet fanned Frank's cheek.

He shifted the barrel, pressed trigger again and a second time, and got an answering shot that crashed against the rock immediately before his face. He looked carefully but could see nothing of the rifleman, ducked before the man could pull trigger again but knew from the report and the spang of the glancing bullet that a third shot had sought him out. It was getting too hot for comfort and his own shooting was becoming

badly cramped, for if he raised sufficiently to fire he apparently offered an excellent target to the man across the way.

Long Tom was shooting steadily at the boulder but three rifles there were still in action and unless Frank could stop the man on the hill Oakes too would soon be in his range. Frank glanced down at the small boulders where Pete had first chosen to make his stand and decided for it. He would be exposed to fire from the boulder for the lower half of his body but at least he would have a better chance at the dangerous man on the hill who had shown that he could place his bullets about where he wanted to.

Frank got down to his free hand and his knees, then lower still and began to crawl forward. He got into position and waited for a puff from the hillside and instead felt the sting of a bullet that ripped into the top of his left boot, cutting the calf of his leg. He did not move but waited with his eyes glued to that spot on the hill where the rifle had last spurted its flame.

Then he heard the sudden cracking of rifles away off at his right, a murderous volley, shot following shot as fast as a careful aim would pump them. Slim and Pete had found their spots and were making the best of them; for the shooting from around the big boulder suddenly ceased. Then there was a single shot from a new position high upon the opposite bank. The bullet did not come Frank's way. He waited, keen eyes alert, searching the position of the man he was watching for and this new spot as well. And in a few moments he saw a form stealing forward along the hillside, not towards the draw mouth but back, towards the boulder. Old Tiofolo, even at that distance and partly screened by the brush but unmistakable.

The shooting from the right bank had also stopped; the firing had altogether ceased. Frank saw Slim Burroughs and Pete Forrester running forward across the draw. They came close to the bolder, alert, rifles at the shoulder. He saw Tiofolo come into plainer sight, waving his rifle. The battle was over.

Frank stood up, making nothing of his slight wounds and thinking of them not at all. Long Tom Oakes came down to join him. His shirt was torn at shoulder and elbow and side and red-stained, but Long Tom was grinning. Together they went to look at the restless horses. The rump of one was torn

but the wound was now hardly bleeding. Tiofolo came down from the hill and met them half-way across the draw; the three turned and walked up to the big boulder where Slim and Pete Forrester were looking at the three dead men there.

"Two on th' hill," Tiofolo said.

"Three here's five," Slim added, "'n' four we dumped out there—— lemme see." He began to count on his fingers. "Never was no good doin' things in my haid. Yeah; that makes nine o' them jiggers."

"There were ten in the basin," old Tiofolo said. He turned and started to walk back towards the ridge and the little bay where the horses were standing.

Most of the men turned to follow him, but Pete Forrester went in the opposite direction. From his place on the bank, before he was in position for his accurate shooting, he had caught sight of a horse of the rustlers half concealed in the brush of the left bank, apparently anchored there by trailing reins. No one noticed what Pete was up to until they heard the sudden pounding of the racing hoofs and turned to see him rounding the bend.

"So I go bring my bronco," Tiofolo said philosophically. It was evident that in his opinion Pete was man enough for the job which judgment was obviously shared by the rest as they turned to other matters.

"You hit, Slim?" Frank asked.

"Nary a scratch," the slender puncher lied, holding his left arm behind him.

"Then suppose you get Tiofolo's cayuse while I do a little more fixing of his arm. We've got a lot of fast work ahead of us and a job right here. Come on, Tiofolo; let's find some water."

"Spring right t' other side o' th' ridge," Slim told him. "I come near goin' down to get me a drink when me 'n' Pete was crawlin' 'long o' there. Say—who ripped my bronco? Aw right, ol' hoss," he added a moment later. "T'ain't more 'in a flea bite 'n' we don't mind a leetle think like that. Shake a foot now 'n' get th' stiffness out."

There wasn't much evidence of stiffness as the little paint horse cavorted sidewise out of the bay, started an abortive sunfish in the open draw, then levelled out as the grizzled puncher jammed in the spurs. But there was stiffness in his

left arm, and the pull he'd given it when he was jerked into the saddle didn't improve his temper any.

"How about you, Tom?" Frank asked. "You need any fixing?"

"No more 'n yourself," Long Tom grinned back at him. "What you want, Frank?"

"I want every one of these loose J Bar B cayuses. I'm not ready," he added grimly, "to let them go home yet."

Meanwhlie Pete Forrester was fogging it up the draw which grew narrower but still easily passable as he proceeded. He encountered a few single cattle as he bowled along, mostly young stock with now and then a cow and its offspring; but as he came to the last bend and saw the walls of the basin spreading out before him he found a considerable press of longhorns starting into the passage.

Pete may not have been as clever as the wily old vaquero but he knew a trick or two himself, and he'd also learned from Tiofolo the advantage that might be gained by logical deduction of what might be passing in the other man's mind. The running battle had been started here and without doubt the sounds of the furious fusilade near the mouth must have reached the ears of the puncher delegated to hold the herd from drifting back the way it had come.

Naturally, then, he would be keeping watch on the far side, and just as naturally he would reason that his nine companions must have executed whatever massacre the pounding shots had done. With all this obvious, Pete knew he would have no difficulty in ambushing the unsuspecting rustler, but that was the farthest idea from his mind.

Outnumbered two to one, that first ruse of old Tiofolo had been necessary to escape extinction themselves and Pete had noticed that all of nine men had had no hesitation in trying to run the vaquero to earth like a measly jack rabbit. Afterwards, it had been man to man on equal terms, and now Pete had determined on the same order of things, which would call for an engagement at close quarters.

To make this possible, and with a wary eye above the waving horns, Pete set to work to turn the leaders of the steers back into the basin, and this he accomplished without too much difficulty and apparently without arousing the suspicions of the horseman he now saw riding slowly back and forth on the far side of the herd. He came into the basin at the tail of a

moving bunch which he shoved along on the edge of the herd towards the right side.

He got the line moving, hazed more to follow and saw the beginning of a slow rotary movement of the herd in that direction, then reined his cayuse close to the left wall and pushed him forward at a walk. Pete's only ruse now was to pull his sombrero rim lower, hang his head a little—although wary, grey eyes were watching alertly—and sway slightly in the saddle with his left hand resting on the saddle-horn.

He passed the fire and his lips tightened as he saw the branding irons still resting in the flames. He also noticed that fresh wood had been recently added, a strong proof of his right thinking. He saw too that he had been observed, as the rider turned from the end of his line and pushed his horse out of a walk, no doubt in haste to learn the news. One thing more Pete essayed. With no cattle between the two men, Pete turned his cayuse's head to the cattle, flank to the rider, exposing the J Bar B brand. Then he wheeld him to face the oncoming horseman.

They were fifty yards apart; it was down to as many feet, and still Pete pressed onward, swaying now groggily. Curiously, perhaps, the man had called no greeting. He was a surely looking fellow, unshaven with unkempt hair. Ten yards apart, and Pete could see him, under the edge of his hat brim, studying his appearance with slowly awakening suspicion. Both horses were walking now. The J Bar B man's right hand shifted the reins to his left, moved towards his belt.

"Who'n hell are you?" he called suddenly roughly.

Pete's two hands went above his head. That is, his left hand went high; his right was at the level of his neck. The man's eyes flickered beyond him, to the head of the pass, then back to rest on Pete's lined face clearly visibly now as his right hand had brushed that hat up. A sneer spread wide on the surly features; a cruel, mocking expression of easy triumph.

"Why, you Gawddamned old rooster; what th' hell you think you pullin', walkin' right into——"

That was the end of his speech, intended to cover the stealthy approach of his right hand to pistol butt. But why was stealth necessary? Before him, less than twenty feet away, was a grizzled old puncher, whose best days had gone long, long ago. More than that, his two hands were upstretched, far from the dull appearing ornament at the slender

waist. Hell, it was more like killing a baby. But that made the brutality all the more easy to exercise. Hell!

The long muzzle cleared leather. It wasn't a flashing motion. It was deliberately steady. The barrel started to raise. Then Pete's right hand made a flickering movement. What it had done before that had been too swift for the eye to catch. Now a silvery streak was flashing in the bright light of the early morning. It was coming straight towards the man who was deliberately raising his big forty-five. It is possible that comprehension dawned in his sluggish mind in that last flicker of time.

The gun crashed, a heavy sound that reverberated back and forth and around the basin; but the hand that pressed the trigger must have jerked in that last moment, for the slug, in place of smashing through the heart of the sturdy old puncher not more than twenty feet distant, tore between left side and armpit, leaving its furrow on either side.

The cayuse plunged, possibly at the explosion, possibly at that flashing streak of light. Its rider swayed backwards, reins slipping through limp, inert fingers. The echoes faded and there was a thud as a body crashed to the ground, the hilt of a big Bowie protruding from its left breast.

Pete rode over, grasped the reins of the nervous horse and led it to a side of the basin among the brush and fastened it to a sturdy trunk. He went back and swung from the saddle with no evidence of his hurt. He drew out the knife, wiped it nonchalantly on the clothing of his late adversary and thrust it into its sheath. He then dragged the body to the basin edge, not far from the bronco, where careless hoofs would not trample it. There was no triumph on Pete's weathered face; no expression at all. He'd come to do a job and he had done it; that was all.

On horseback again, he trotted over to the opening, turned back some steers which were showing signs of finding that way inviting, then took his stand there, idly watching the turning cattle, seeing the far side beginning to drift towards the first draw. That didn't bother him. He'd an idea that Frank would want to drive back that way. He cast an eye up at the sun, estimating how far the day would see them on their homeward journey, his mind already returned to matters of routine.

Sounds down the draw drew his gaze around. A mixed bunch of cattle were being hazed towards him at the run, with Frank Carleton at their heels. Pete moved aside to let them join the herd and Frank drew rein beside him, his quick eyes taking in the red of his shirt, then searching Pete's face for an indication of the seriousness of his hurt. There was none. Frank's expression was sober; his feature grim and stern.

"Any J Bar B broncos here?" he asked.

"One's tethered in th' brush beyond th' brandin' fire, an' a couple 're loose other side of th' cattle. They's two M J hosses 'long with 'em now too."

"Where'd you leave the feller whose horse you tied up?"

"Purty near 'longside th' bronco."

"I want you to bring the two J Bar B's here, Pete. Slim and Tiofolo will be up right soon and begin the pushing. You can put a lead on the M J broncos and see if you can start the point. Swing west of the timber we camped in last night which will give us easy going clear of the ridgy country all the way to the Mary Jane. We got a lot of travelling to do to-day. You need any fixing, Pete? Won't have time later."

"Hell, no," Pete called back over his shoulder, already on his way.

Frank swung down by the tethered horse, letting the reins trail. He stepped over to the lifeless body and carried it to the saddle of the J Bar B bronco, whese he lashed it securely. He then took the branding irons from the fire, cooled them in the nearby spring after he had wrecked their further usefulness on a rock, and thrust them in the saddle scabbard of the dead rider. Attaching a short lead rope, he mounted and made his way back to the opening of the draw where Pete was waiting with two more horses. Pete got the idea at once and lost no time in adding his captives to Frank's lead string.

Half-way to the first bend, Frank met Slim Burroughs and Tiofolo and they pulled up.

"Unless you need him to get the push started," Frank said, "I'll send Oakes over the ridge to pick up the point with Pete. It will take them both to swing away from the bat land."

Tiofolo nodded. His keen eyes were on Frank's with unreadable expression.

"I don't need Slim," Tiofolo told him. "A little brush fire will do as much as ten men. You take him, *Senor* Frank."

Never, since he was a grown boy, had the old vaquero addressed him without the *señor* no matter how pressing the circumstance. Not once, although many was the time they had worked side by side as common hands, had he lost the respect due the son of his old employer. And his devotion was as steadfast. Frank knew that, by that inscrutable look in the keen old eyes by Tiofolo's advice.

Frank shook his head decisively. This was his job; one he was determined to accomplish at greatest risk, but he wouldn't expose one of his trusted four to what was really unnecessary danger. Besides, every man was needed, including himself, to handle that wild herd on a swift drive. He lifted the reins and jogged on.

Long Tom Oakes rode beside him until he swung off to head over the low ridge to the foot of the first draw. He, too, looked longingly at Frank, but Frank waved him on, then swung lightly in the other direction, more easterly, a course that might take him in time to the home ranch of the J Bar B.

And the strangest cavalcade that ever was seen on those wide plains was strung out behind him. One man, erect, his alert eyes warily searching the country before and to both sides of him, in the lead; behind, ten dead men, each bound firmly to the saddle where no rough going would jog him off; ten horses, whose flanks bore the brand of the J Bar B, strung one after the other by lead ropes, jogging steadily at the pace set by the leader.

In each scabbard was every man's rifle, some partly loaded, some emptied of exploded cartridges, showing, as did also the depleted belts, the fight they had made. No one would ever know which ones had cut down the unsuspecting Rip Haskell and Peeley. These men would never tell. No one would ever tell whose bullets had ended their earthly careers. All bore the manks of the lead except one who had a knife thrust through his heart. And that one's belt holster carried a forty-five with one chamber an empty shell. Frank had seen to that before leaving the basin.

And up front, on the horse next to the man leading, these broken, damning branding irons stuck out into full view, telling the story that no man of the range could possibly fail to read. It was a strange, awesome sight, a silent, gruesome procession, winding over the lowest rises, keeping to the harder ground of swale and little valley, jogging steaidly onward with no quickening or slackening of the monotonous pace.

It was a lesson of outlawry; a lesson of swift, merciless justice, long needed in that lawless country; long called for by the spread that had harboured and directed such as these. Ten men had gone out to blot and brand and steal. Ten dead men were riding homeward, the fruit of the nefarious endeavour. It was a terrific toll, altogether complete.

The stock was being given back by the exacters of justice; the weapons, even the instruments of pilfery. And the riders as well; but they were no longer useful to the crooked bosses, except possibly as dread example. And this example, for what it might be worth, was being led to the door by Frank Carleton to carry the message that the law of the land was not yet dead, unlike these infractors of it.

Frank knew that the message would be read, and correctly. No man who had ever forked a bronco or chased a yearling could miss it. What good it might do, what effect it would have, he did not know. There was the strong possibility that the appearance of that awful cavalcade would empty the ranch instantly, that before the night was finished the five would find themselves again embattled, but this time by four times their number. Well, Frank thought, he was ready to meet it; if that should be the J Bar B's response one time was as good as another to settle the matter. And what he was ready for, so were four other staunch and sturdy fighters. No matter the outcome, the lesson would be there just the same and would be bruited from one end of a great country to the other. And that would bring some good, somewhere.

But Frank's immediate concern was to get his cavalcade to its goal. He did not propose an attempt to lead it right up to the porch, to call old John Banks and his vicious son to the gallery to look down upon it. He would have liked to witness their reception of the gift he had brought back to them, but he had other even more important work to do, and about the last place he would prefer his career to be ended was before the doorstep of that outlaw spread.

Frank was counting on the correctness of his first surmise, when he had topped the rise behind old Tiofolo and viewed the first of the broad rangeland. With the work they must know was going on in the basin, all other men of the outfit would make themselves seen well through the day and the next on the opposite side of the range, down towards Little River Valley, perhaps in a portion of it where not only trail-driver but other ranch-riders would identify them. Banking on this, Frank pressed on far beyond the safety of ordinary days. Finally he had the ranch-house in view; then he altered his course, striking across country until he came to a fairly worn trail leading to the home corrals.

There he eased the bay back beside the leader of the ten, unfastened the lead rope and gave the animal a solid thump on its rump. He had not slowed the pace, and it was not changed now. The new lead horse had its nose in the air. If anything it jogged the faster, and the nine horses behind it steadily kept their positions.

Frank drew off at one side, let the last go by him, then wheeled and clapped his spurs lightly to the flanks of the willing bay. He was not careful of his course now. He cared only for speed. Four men were working desperately to cover as much ground as possible on the road to safety. They would not feel safe that night; far from it, or the next day or the next night for that matter; but distance would help towards it and four men were not enough So Frank cut over hill and down dale, setting a straight course by the sun, with his plainsman's instinct, and racing it to the zenith.

The ranch cook of the J Bar B was standing in the doorway of his shack, gazing dissatisfiedly over the prairie. He was not stout, as a jovial cook should be, but a thin, sallow faced man given to dyspepsia and stubbornly persisting a cure by the way of a bottle. A chuck wagon had gone on with plenty hands but he had sent a helper with it, pleading a bad turn and the big supper to prepare when the crew should ride skylarking in to jeer over the blazer they'd run on old Mont Jackson. For even the cook knew what was afoot; he'd heard the men laughing over it at breakfast.

Altogether he was not a happy man. Between disease and cure his nights were troublesome, he was given to seeing things; and was very certain he was beginning to see things right now as his short-sighted eyes caught a picture of a long

string of horses, at equal distance nose to tail, jogging steadily down the trail to the horse trap and corral.

"Now what in tarnation be them critters up to:" he mumbled to himself. It was a habit he had talking aloud to himself, which many a pail of water from some cross-grained puncher had failed to cure.

He had a pot in one hand, a big spoon in the other; he had stepped to the open doorway only for a breath of air. He still held them as he went outside and walked a few paces for better view. He got it, as the cavalcade swept not far from him in the turn for the big trough.

Pot and spoon banged to the ground. He let out one hoarse, frightened scream and went galloping for the ranch-house. Whether he really believed what he thought he had seen didn't matter. He'd had many a turn that had had all the effects of reality, and this vision was pursuing him relentlessly. He gave another startled look over his shoulder as he ran, pulled out another notch of speed and hopped yelping up the porch.

He made a lot of noise of a kind that suggested calamity, but when old John Banks, followed by the unregenerate Bert, came boiling out the door he was inarticulate. His gestures, however, were wild, fear inspiring and at last slightly intelligible. Apparently he wanted to show them something, somewhere that was too frightful for mere description. It is possible that Bert might have had a suspicion of whatever bad news it was, although he was not in the slightest prepared for it. But old John Banks followed indignantly but as innocently as a kitten out past the cook-shack where he got his first intimation.

He saw it in the shape of ten broncos standing by the corral bars, with ten dead men limp over the saddles. He let out a searing oath and not even young Bert beat him to the string. He came to the lead horse of the string, gazed at a face he recognized, then his protruding eyes caught and held on the broken branding irons sticking out from the saddle boot. He yanked them fiercely and threw them on the ground.

Bert was cursing luridly. Something like panic was closing in upon him, and like all weak-natured men he sought to throw it upon others.

"I bet I know who done this," he yelled. "There ain't another outfit in all Texas that'd dry-gulch the whole

outfit—er—all ten of these fellers. Old Mont Jackson's, no other. This 's th' last straw. I'll get th' crew up an' we'll wipe them off th' face of th' earth."

He started to turn away—at all events he could not stand that sight longer—when old John called to him to wait. John Banks had turned crooked; there was no doubt of that, but he'd been a range man from his earliest days and something of that earlier poise returned to him in this moment of disaster.

He scowled at the damning irons, then drew the first rifle from its scabbard, thrust a finger in the bore, looked at the black grime it showed, then levered out three cartridges before it clicked empty. He set that aside and took out the next and found it also dirty and the chamber cartridge the only one it held. He gave Bert a scowling glance and went to the third. That was enough for him. He didn't need having a picture drawn; he had the meat of the story.

"There weren't no dry gulching," he growled. "There was a fight an' a hell of a one." Then his voice got hard and accusing. "What d'you know about this, Bert? You know something?"

"What th' hell should I know about it?" Bert retorted. "Couldn't you see I was as much surprised as you?"

Old John still had the third rifle in his grasp. He had packed out two cartridges. Whether it held another he did not know. Neither did Bert.

"So help me," Old John said low-toned, "son or no son, I'll blast everlastin' daylight out of you if you don't tell me damned quick all about this."

Bert took one look at the raging face of his parent and decided that he'd like to live at least a minute longer.

"It weren't my idea," he began. "I only heard 'bout it. I heard these fellers talkin' it over as something they'd like to do," with a gesture towards the row of silent witnesses who could not deny his lie.

"Well, what was it?" Old John roared, as Bert paused and swallowed nervously.

"I reck'n they planned on cuttin' out a few of damned old Mont Jackson's stuff an' givin' 'em a little run."

"That's a damned lie! You're lyin' in yore throat! You planned this thing yourself, ever' bit of it!"

Bert was not in shape to deny it, or in position either; not with that ribe muzzle waving before his face. His look and his silence gave enough of assent.

"Now look what you got us into," John stormed on. "Ten of our men caught brand-blottin', and there ain't a livin' soul in all Texas but'd say they got just 'xactly what they deserved. What we done we could get away with, like we're done an' other folks 're doin' to help keep alive. But we can't get away with this. Of all th' Gawd-damned foolishness for a grown man, like you're s'pposed to be, to think up. An' what 're you goin' to do 'bout these men here? Goin' to bring 'em back to life? Ain't we short-handed enuff as it is?"

"I know what I am goin' to do about it," Bert growled, with his best semblance of rage, although the sight before him and the words hurled at him had hmi shivering in his boots. "For ever one o' those fellers there I' takin' two. I'm goin'——"

"Who you goin' to take 'em from?" Old John yelled at him. "Look at them guns. Look at them belts. Musta been a coupla hundred shots 'n both sides. Goin' to take it from th' fellers able to down ever' man of them hard fighters? Goin' to take 'em from th' fellers who had th' nerve to bring 'em right back to our doorstep, along with them damned irons to tell us to our face what they was doin'?"

Bert had no good answer to this, but he attempted one.

"They must been outnumbered two, three to one, mebbe more."

"Yeah. Yeah. Who's got twenty, thirty men to spare for work like that? You say Mont Jackson's men done it, huh? Well a feller come back from that range 'bout 'n hour ago an' told me he counted nigh on to twenty Mont's men cuttin'. Now what you to say?"

Bert did not have a thing, but a little chill of apprehension travelled up his spine. Old John went on.

"Yeah, you fork a bronco, Bert. You hustle over there an' bring in th' men. An' you tell 'em to leave their guns alone. You have 'em get shovels an' you 'tend to this yourself. I wanta think th' whole dam' mess over." And with that, Old John stamped back to his desk in the ranch-house, a somewhat older and badly harassed man.

With the last remnant of his common sense shrivelling

in the heat of his rage, of course it was possible that Old John might order out a crew to seek reprisal, and certainly there would be those in the outfit who would be yelling for revenge on their slain companions. But as he sat on, away past his lunch hour—the cook having had another turn and taken to his bunk—his white anger simmered and in its place grew a little of that dread chill of fear which Bert had experienced. He wanted to learn a little more about the number and the manner of the men who had done this thing to the best of his outfit and bung it all back into his face.

And while Old John Banks was mulling over his dilemma, five stalwarts were pushing their herd onward far into the night. It was then that Frank, by the flickering light of the small cook fire, saw to it that all wounds were washed and dressed with as near clean material as they could muster. Afterwards two men watched the herd while two men slept, but old Tiofolo took turns with no one. When the last of the roasted steak was eaten and the dishes washed and put aside, he gathered up his roll and sought a place on a hill top. If he slept or not that night, he said nothing about it but he was back busy with the coffee long before the first star in the east had begun to fade.

They pushed steadily on, working with the wild cattle as ten men might have worked, and in the course of time reached the cutting ground of the Mary Jane spread. And still they kept at it, roping, cutting, driving. Not one of them had a word to say of their expedition. The cattle were all back. That was the answer. The one exception was when Frank told young Walt and Cam Sneed of the fate of the two M J punchers. And finally the immediate work was finished. The stock cattle had all been cleaned from the herd and scattered in fair grazing ground to be picked up later.

So it was that, looking out her window late one afternoon, Clemmie Jackson saw a picture that could never grow old. A thin stream of red, white, black and spotted cattle trickled out into the prairie. Half a dozen horsemen rode ahead of them. Suddenly the horsemen stopped and turned the leaders back into a little group. On came the vari-coloured stream, in ones and twos and threes, while the little pool of cattle spread like molasses in a plate. Clemmie knew what it was. She had seen it scores of times but never tired of watching it. She couldn't see from her window where the

cattle were coming from, but she knew that the cutting was done and the stock cattle, cows and calves, were thrown back on the range. She knew that somewhere back by that thin, trickling stream, faithful old Cam Sneed was sitting, grim-faced on his horse, counting the Mary Jane steers. When he came in he would be able to tell her father exactly how many there were.

She watched the last drop trickle into the giant plate on the prairie, saw the puddle grow round on the bedding ground, and then she counted twenty-four horsemen. Ten of them were around the herd, sixteen were riding towards the chuck wagon, out there under the trees. They rode in pairs. She had not seen one man riding alone that day, except when Cam came in from the trail-camp. Was it all true about the J Bar B outfit? Would there be another fight? Then her heart seemed swelling to burst; tears stung her eyes, and her throat closed up. Down there in his room, wounded, lay the father she loved more than anything on earth. She had done something to hurt him terribly and didn't even know what it was. She was going to him, no matter what he might say or do.

Clemmie crept down the stairs and into the grim old family room. It was growing dusk, but she could see old Mont's gaunt form on the bed.

"Come here, honey," he called, in the old, familiar, tender tones with which he had kissed the hurt fingers when she was a little child.

Clemmie dropped to her knees on the floor by the bed and, laying her head on her arms, shook with sobs.

"There, there, little girl," crooned old Mont, hoarsely. "Never mind. Everything will come all right."

No one, witnessing that scene, would have thought the fires of vengeance could ever burn again in old Mont Jackson's heart. Someone did witness it. There was a soft knock at the open door, and Clemmie looked up, expecting to see Cam.

"Hallo, Frank!" her father greeted. "Is that you? Come in and take a seat."

"Thank you, sir, I haven't time. Mr. Sneed sent me to tell you that there are three thousand and ninety-four steers, and that he's bedding them to-night in the second draw flat, where we can watch them."

"Fine! That's about a hundred more than I 'lowed they'd be. Tell Cam to come in after supper; I want to see him."

Clemmie didn't rise to her feet, but stood there on her knees, the fading light from the window on her tear-stained face, looking through her tears at the man she had hoped was gone out of her life. There was nothing of the enraged queen about her now. Her face was a picture of humility and submission. Hat in hand, Frank stood talking. Presently he asked how the lame leg was coming on.

"Take good care of him, Miss Jackson," he was saying. "We'll need him when the big showdown comes." There was nothing domineering or commanding in his tone now, but the low, soft drawl peculiar to the sunny land of south Texas.

"I'll do anything I can for him. Anything on earth he wants me to do," replied Clemmie bravely.

Frank went out, and old Mont gathered his daughter to his arms. He didn't have anything to say to Cam particularly, but he was ready and rearing to face the world again. He had his little daughter back. He had just heard her say she would do anything on earth he wanted her to do. Nothing else mattered.

Mont Jackson knew why Cam had sent Frank, instead of coming himself. The old puncher had done a preposterous thing, something that no man had ever dared to do before, and he didn't want to face Mont yet awhile. The old tyrant grinned in the darkness. Cam had been right, as usual, and he wanted a chance to tell him so. He had known it all along, but had held back on account of Clemmie's dislike for Carleton. Now it was all right.

CHAPTER X

A REAL TRAIL-BOSS

CAME night, and the Mary Jane outfit was very much awake. Three thousand wild range steers are not an easy proposition at any time. Only the most skilful cowboys can be trusted to handle such. The most trivial accident could start them on a wild stampede in an instant. So, from towards midnight

until morning, every man was out. While a few rode around the herd, chanting old songs of the cow country, just to let the cattle know that they were there and all was well, the others rode the valley far and wide, watching for any party of J Bar B men that might try another raid like the one some nights before.

That was an anxious night for Cam and Frank, who rode together without even stopping. From time to time they exchanged a few words, but for the most part they were silent and watchful, each busy with his own thoughts. When light came in the east, and here and there around the edge of the herd a steer got up, stretched and began to graze, the weary riders wondered that no effort had been made to cause them trouble. Could they have known it, trouble a-plenty was brewing for the Mary Jane.

Candley had bedded the trail-herd a little way from the J Bar B ranch-house. He had received the thousand steers from old John Banks, and when night came on, he, Banks, and Bert were sitting in the ranch office talking.

"Old Mont Jackson has just about ruined things for us," whined Banks.

"Ruined nothing!" snorted Candley, in disgust. "A little thing like that don't amount to a snap."

"Little thing! Call losing a thousand cattle a litte thing? Call getting Shag, the best trail-boss in the business, killed a little thing? Call getting a lot of men killed and crippled all the way round a little thing?"

"Oh, it's pretty bad on the cripples. The dead ones don't know anything about it, and the live ones have got another chance."

"That's all right, for you, Candley. All you lose is that you miss getting a thousand steers at a dollar a head, and having to pay five for 'em, maybe. You don't count men. It's something else wtih us. You trail fellows started this mess, and now you go off and leave us to finish it."

"We started it? Where do you get that? Shag's receiving cattle from you, peaceful as anybody, when along comes this gang and starts the rough stuff. Trail-drives have raised the price of cattle from two to five dollars, and they're still going up. There's no money in the business at them prices, if we can't pick up something. We have to fight from the time we leave the home pens until we get to Dodge City.

Why shouldn't you fellows that make money off us do a little fighting to keep things like they are.

"But you don't know what's happening in this Little River country. Bert and me has rode all day, and we talked to a lot of fellers that's thrown stuff our way. We tried to get 'em to come in with us, but they'd heard of the fight here, and they're afraid of old Mont Jackson. Mont, he's been talking to a lot of little fellers, and some of the bigger ones, about organizing and plumb stopping trail-driving, unless they let anybody cut their herds that wants to, and——"

"Yes, I know all that; old stuff," laughed Candley. "Children have been scared with it down in the coast country for three years. I'll tell you of a case just like Jackson's. It was nobody but old Joe Carleton, the daddy of this young desperado that's with Jackson now. Old Joe Carleton heard somewhere that an honest man is the noblest work of God, and he goes to posing as one. He makes the same talk around the country that Jackson's making. He swore he'd cut herds, and he did. He cut one too many—and they buried him."

"They ain't buried old Mont to do no good yet," reminded Banks.

"No, not yet, but he never would 'a' cut Shag's herd if he'd had any sort of even break. They jumped him right in the middle of things, without asking any questions, and just murdered him. They'll be another herd along pretty soon, and I'll bet you a thousand dollars against a dogy yearlin' they don't cut it."

"I'll take the bet, if I have to steal the yearling," cackled Banks.

"No, I guess I'll draw that bet," said Candley, "for I expect your outfit to help see they don't cut it. I sent a man back the trail to-day to pass along the word about this Little River country. You'll get notice when they're coming."

All through the conversation, Bert had held his tongue. There was something on his mind besides cattle and money. From boyhood he had been led to believe that Clemmie Jackson belonged to him any time he wanted to take her. He had made the proposal, Christmas, and she had put him off, though she did tie a love-knot ribbon on his hatband. After that he had complained about her dancing two sets together with Curly, and she had told him plainly that when she wanted

to see him again she'd let him know. He was losing more than anybody. Why couldn't they have let this mess alone until he had married Clemmie? Then old Mont would have listened to reason. With his daughter's name and her fortune at stake, perhaps he wouldn't have been quite so honest. This was as clear a conception of honesty as Bert had. As for his love for Clemmie, it was as near human affection, perhaps, as such an animal could be capable of.

It was towards noon when Cam and Frank rode down to the herd, intending to have the men move the cattle a little farther down the valley, where grass was better. Looking off to where the trail came in from the south side, they saw two heavy wagons, each drawn by six mules, come lumbering down into the valley, closely followed by a *remuda* of two hundred or more horses.

"There's the devil again, as the boy said when he saw his daddy dead," muttered Cam.

"Big trail outfit, all right," said Frank.

"Yes, and just when we don't want one. It's all we can do to handle the trouble we got. They's not a chance we can get by, with a trail outfit on one side of us and the J Bar B on the other."

"We'll just have to push our herd back up the valley until the storm blows over, and do the best we can. I've about turned fatalist, Cam. Seems that what is to happen will happen, no matter what we do. Let's just stop here a little, and see what thty do."

The wagons came on and stopped at the stream. Unhitching their teams, they made camp. The mules were thrown into the *remuda*, which was grazing in a flat a little way below the camp.

"Huh! Looks like they aim to stay here a while," commented Cam.

"Yes, it does, and that reminrs me of something. Yesterday, about the time you and I finished our talk, I saw a lone rider take the back trail from Candley's camp. Shorthanded as he was, he don't send a man back for nothing. 'very crooked trail outfit from here to the coast will know about our run-in with old Shag inside of a week."

As they sat their horses, watching the drama that was being enacted before them, Cam signalled the M J men with his hat to drift their herd slowly back up the valley.

Presently, a lone rider trotted out of the fringe of young timber that skirted the valley, where the trail came in from the south. A quarter of a mile out in the open he stopped.

"There they come, damn 'em," growled old Cam, as the two pointers and the lead cattle emerged from the timber. The lone rider was signalling something to the pointers.

"Ah," said Frank, "that's the trail-boss, and he's got a little decency anyway. He's seen our herd and is throwing his down the valley."

The partners, the trail-camp and the trail-boss represented the three points of a triangle, apparently fixed. The big herd turned down the valley. When the trail-boss saw that he had been understood, he turned and trotted on towards the camp.

"Come on, and let's take our medicine," said Frank.

"Huh! Yuh and me can't take much."

"We can at least find out what we've got to take. I'd rather talk to the boss alone than with a gang of his men around him."

They rode owards the camp and reached it just as the other rider did.

"'Light, gents, and rest you' saddles and bridles," he called, as he swung lightly to the ground, a little way from the wagons. There was a jocular note in his greeting, and a twinkle in his deep blue eyes.

Frank and Cam dismounted at the invitation. The man before them was probably fifty years old. He was not above medium height, and inclined to stoutness. His sandy hair was long and wanted to turn into saucy curls at the ends. There was shrewdness and courage in his face. Nests of wrinkles at the corners of his eyes indicated that he laughed much, but his chin was of the sort that made it more wise to laugh with than at him. He wrote a single old wooden-handled .45, swung just forward of the left hip. His very air seemed to say, "Here I am. Take me as you find me, or else leave me very much alone." As Cam and Frank approached, he took a step forward and extended his hand.

"Tom Kinney's my name, gents," he introduced himself, frankly enough.

"Sneed's mine, and this is Mr. Carleton," returned Cam, his leathery face a noncommittal mask that had about the same expression as that of a wooden Indian.

Kinney shot a keen glance at Frank. "M J men, I reck'n, ain't you?" he went on.

"Yes."

"Understand you Little River fellers have been cutting some herds."

"We cut one a little."

"That's what I heard. Tell me old Shag Sanders got his'n cut right smart. Shag used to say they'd never cut his herd while he was alive. I reck'n he kept his word. They tell me he was right dead when it was cut."

"Yes, he was killed in the fight."

"Reck'n you fellers think you can stop some of the rustlin' by cutting every trail-herd that comes through."

"That was the idea," said Cam, bluntly.

"It ain't a bad one, if it'll work, but it's shore hard on a man's clothes. Guess you aim to cut my herd, hell or no hell, like they said you cut Shag's?"

"'Yes." There was much in that one word. It was a cold, flat promise that the herd would be cut or there would be trouble.

"Well, fellers, I hate to disappoint you, but"—and Kinney's blue eyes twinkled again—"the facts is that, while I may be bad, I ain't as bad as Shag was. I'd rather you cut my herd while I'm alive and lookin' on. I ain't got but forty men, and it's one hell of a drag from here to Dodge City. I'm apt to need all my men and all my ammunition to argue with the Cheyennes when I get into the Indian country. So I'd hate to get any kilt up in a cutting mess like Shag did."

"Ain't no use in it," growled Cam. "All we want is what's fair and right."

"I see. Well, now, I'm going to tell you just where my outfit stands on this herd-cutting business, and then you can take it or leave it, just as you like."

"Ain't no use in trouble," persisted Cam.

"Maybe not, but—this herd belongs to Old Man Alec Bowman, and I'm just his trail-boss. I do my dangest to live up to his orders, even if the hide slips a little."

Kinney stopped and rolled a smoke. After he had taken a few deep and meditative inhalations, he resumed.

"Old Man Alec's hard, but he says to me, 'Tom,' he says, 'these trail-herds are just cattle transportation, same as the railroads will be when they build into Texas in a few years.

They're a blessing if they're run square and honest, and a curse if they ain't, same as anything else. When my little Dimunt B road-brand goes on to a cow brute and it goes into my herd, I expect you to fight like hell to keep it there. I don't want that brand on nothin' that ain't bought fair and honest and paid for.' That's what old Alec said to me two years ago, when I taken the first trail-herd through for him. If he caught anything in my herd that wasn't on the level, he'd fire me. If he wanted me to drive anything that wasn't honest, I'd quit."

A look of surprise passed between Cam and Frank.

"There she lays," Kinney went on, after a few pulls at his cigarette. "This thing of trail-drivers refusing to have their herds cut is going to stop. It stopped with me and with every other honest man when I pointed the first herd north. The right to cut a herd as it passes out of a man's range is one of the ancient landmarks and principal tenets of the cow fraternity in Texas. It's been violated, and a lot of ranchmen has got to be about as bad as the crooked trail-bosses, but they's still the seeds of honesty and respectability in the country, and, bad as it's tore, the cow business will grow together again and be stronger than ever."

"I don't see any chance for a quarrel between us," laughed Frank Carleton, relieved at the turn affairs had taken.

"Not unless you fellers start it, and then I'll do my dangdest to talk you out of it. There's my herd. I'd like to hold 'em here on this good grass to-day, if I ain't trespassin' none on nobody. I don't know when I come into yo' range, and I won't know when I go out. So it's up to you to bring on yo' men and go cutting whenever you're ready, and I'll help you all I can."

"Thank you, Mr. Kinney," said Cam. "If all trail-bosses were like you there'd never be any trouble. Rustlin' would just about stop, 'cause they'd be no market for stuff that was stole."

"They'll all be like me—and better—in a little while. I've smelt right smart powder smoke, and I don't like the way it burns; still, it has to be burnt sometimes. A few more little messes like the one Shag runs into, and they'll go to thinking. That little yarn is romping up and down the trail like a prairie fire. The honest men that's been afraid of rustlers and crooked trail-bosses will begin to oil their guns and come out in the open for honesty and decency."

"I hope so," drawled old Cam, "but it seemed to take them a long time to get at it."

"Oh, I don't know. This trail-driving was an awful booger when it first started. Hell just nacherly bust loose down in the coast country." Kinney shot another keen glance at Frank. "This Little River country won't never see what they seen down there."

They talked on for a few minutes, and then Kinney looked at Frank again.

"Ain't you Frank Carleton?" he asked. "A son of old Joe Carleton that owned the Arrowhead, down on the San Antonio River?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll be damned! Me and a lot more folks have been wondering whatever went with you. What are you doing away up here in this Little River country?

"Working for the M J outfit."

"Any more of the old Arrowhead men up here?"

"Four," and Frank named them, even to the old Mexican.

"Old Tiofolo!" laughed Kinney. "He has surprised more bad hombres than any man in Texas. He must be nearly a hundred years old, and I'll bet he can hit the edge of a playing card at forty yards with both eyes shut. Taught you to shoot, didn't he, Frank?"

"Tried to, but I never could——"

"Never mind! No son of old Joe Carleton, and trained by Tiofolo, ever throwed down his gun and loped out of a fight—unless the gun got so damned hot he couldn't hold it!"

Frank got on his horse and rode up the valley a little way to signal the M J men to hold little the herd where it was.

"Are you foreman of the M J?" asked Kinney.

"No, sir. I'm just tryin' to sorter ramrod the outfit until old Mont Jackson gets on his feet again. He was shotten some in that ruckus with old Shag Sanders."

"No! Was it bad?"

"Oh, no. Just a bullet hole in the meaty part of the calf of his laig, but it lames him some."

"That's good! Know anything about this Frank Carleton?"

"Only what he tells me."

"If he told you anything, he told you the truth. His

old daddy, Joe Carleton, undertaken the same thing in the coast country that yo' boss is trying to do here, in this Little River country. The good men were afraid, just like some are here now. They hung back and let old Joe get robbed and killed, but they can see now, and they'd back that boy for a million if he'd go back there—and they wouldn't make no mistake."

"I kinder like him myself," drawled Cam, "but he's right handy with a gun."

"Handy, hell! He had to be handy, if he lived through that mess. He's more than that. Him and them four old Arrowhead punchers that's with him can whip any twenty men on this trail. They ain't got sense enough to be afraid, and they can inhale powder-smoke and never sneeze. They'll stay with a friend after he's quit himself, and follow an enemy until the smoke of hell hides him. Old Tiofolo would die as willingly for Frank or any one of his friends as a mother would for her child."

Tom Kinney was a business man. He had just been getting acquainted; now he came to the point.

"That herd yonder's all steers, ain't it?"

"Yes."

"Does Jackson want to sell 'em?"

"He might. What're you payin'?"

"Well, that sorter depends. I got six thousand. Old Man Alec told me to buy up to ten thousand, if I could get honest stuff. He give me a limit, but of course he expected to get 'em for less, if I could. Let's ride over and look at 'em."

Two hours later old Mont Jackson was dressed, with a boot on his left foot and the "busted laig" on a pillow in a chair.

"I want to sell, Mr. Kinney, but them's mortgaged stuff," he was saying. "I sent Cam to town, and Morton'll come any time now."

"All right. My limit's six dollars a head for two-year-olds and up, take 'em as they come. I'm ready to go the limit, because—because—well, I just like M J steers," and Tom Kinney's blue eyes fairly danced. He knew he was paying a dollar a head more than he would have to pay. He was deliberately donating three thousand dolars of old Alec Bowman's money to stiffen Mont Jackson's backbone. He

wanted to see the old code of cattledom preserved, and, after seeing old Mont's face and talking to him a while, Kinney was pretty sure he had found a reliable preserving agency.

"Now, Mr. Morton," said old Mont, when the banker arrived, "I want this open and above board. They'll be around nineteen thousand of this. You take Mr. Kinney's cheque and release the cattle. Then you take out my interest, cancel one note, and leave me the balance in the bank to operate on. I ain't paid my men for six months, and they got to be paid."

A month before that Morton would have taken it all and let old Mont and his men sing. But Mr. Morton was a wise banker, and he kept his ear to the ground. He had heard a lot of talk since old Mont had cut the trail-herd, and he could read signs. Cattle business in the Little River country was going to be transacted differently from here on. So he agreed; the cattle were counted, and he went on back to town with the cheque.

That night old Mont Jackson slept the sleep of the just and happy. He hadn't feared fighting a little, but he had feared that he would either lose the cattle or be unable to sell them. He was safe now. The bank would be satisfied for another year, and if he could make one more sale he'd in the clear. Not only that, but he had money to pay the loyal punchers who had stayed wtih him through all the trouble. So he went to sleep, thinking his troubles were over. It was just as well. But for the lull and quiet that falls between the battle of life few would have the courage to go on.

CHAPTER XI

DAYS OF PEACEFUL LABOUR

THAT same afternoon, Frank Carleton went to the trail-boss.

"Mr. Kinney, I don't know whether I ought to butt in on this or not, I'm going to tell you something," he said. "I want you to understand that I'm telling it to save you rouble."

"I believe that. Let's have it over."

"You may have trouble over those M J cattle."

"How come? It was a square sale, wasn't it?"

"Yes. The trouble will be until you get your road brand on them."

Then Frank went on to tell of the war with the J Bar B, and the likelihood that they would continue to try to make trouble.

"I see. Thank you for that, Frank. Jackson agreed to let his men help with the branding and also with herding until it was done. Now I know the situation, I guess I can handle it. I don't fight cow-men that want to cut my herd for their own stuff, but it'll be damned unpleasant for anybody that tries to take anything away from me that I've bought and paid for."

So it happened that late that evening, as two J Bar B punchers rode down to the trail-herd to find out what they could, they ran into old Tom Kinney, who was watching for them. They asked him a good many questions and told him what a rough outfit the M J was.

"I ain't had no trouble with 'em—yet," said Kinney. "I bought three thousand steers from 'em, and they're helpin' me hold and brand. It might interest you to know that I've paid for 'em and they're mine. I don't know how well the M J outfit and me can get along about anything else, but between us we got seventy men to hold these herds, and we'll damn nigh hold 'em."

Kinney's jaws snapped shut on his last word, and, turning, he rode away, and left them standing. He guessed the information would go at once to the J Bar B, and it did. But for that, John Banks' outfit would have run into another hot trap that very night. Tom Kinney really would have enjoyed a little mill with them, but he didn't want to risk starting a stampede with a gun-fight. So men from the trail-herd and from the M J saw no prowling horsemen as they guarded the range that night.

The following days were a period of peaceful labour. Branding three thousand steers by the old, primitive method of roping and throwing was no light task, but it went bravely forward.

"Just a light, hair brand that'll peel dry and last until they shed next spring," ordered Kinney. "All I want is a road brand that'll show until I pen 'em at Dodge City."

There were plenty of irons for the little Diamond B and plenty of men to use them. Early the following morning the

work began. A steer would be let out of the M J herd. A horseman would take after it. At the right distance from the branding fires a rope would whir, a pony would set back to take the shock, and almost before the fallen animal regained its breath, smoke had curled up from its hip, the rope was off, and it was trotting away towards the trail-herd, bearing the Diamond B for all the world to read.

Now that peace seemed to have come again to the Little River country, Clemmie Jackson, who was cow people of purest strain, had out her horse and rode. She would sit her pony for hours, watching the superb horsemanship of the men and their skill and wizardry with the rope, while her heart would leap at the intelligence of the trained horses that seemed to flip a thousand pound steer to the ground as if it were a feather.

There was more than ponies and cattle, roping and branding, that Clemmie was watching. Men, and one man in particular, she watched. Since that evening that she had seen Frank Carleton through blurry tears, as she knelt by her father's bed, and heard him speak in his soft, lazy, south-Texas drawl, she had felt a change towards him. She had even begun to suspect what was really true—that she had at last met a man who could, if he would, conquer her turbulent spirit and make her very soul his slave. Here was a man who would crawl to no human being. One who would value affection of a good woman beyond anything, but would never beg for favour. Clemmie had been given opportunity far beyond most girls of her time, and she knew many things. So, furtively, she watched Frank, when none might know she was watching. She saw him do his full share of work, along with the other men. She noted his matchless skill as a horseman and the uncanny deftness of his hand with the rope. Never once did she see him miss a throw or bungle the fall of an animal.

She noticed that he was always courteous to the others, and when they stopped occasionally for a rest, he was apt to stand apart and take no part in the good-natured badinage of his fellows. Always he seemd to be thinking, and frequently there was a serious look on his face. For three days she had tried in vain to fall casually into conversation with him, which should have been easy enough as he and Cam had become side-partners and were always together. The most he had done

had been to raise his hat and speak respectfully or answer any question she asked him.

This piqued Clemmie. What manner of man was this she had found. She had made every advance that seemed possible to her, in spite of the fact that he was one of her father's cow hands. Couldn't the fan forget the things she had said to him that first afternoon that she met him? It was the third day, and almost sunset, when the last lone steer to be branded came thundering across the open. Frank's rope whirled and sped. He was riding at the moment that same wiry little brown horse. It braced its legs; the steer turned a flip, and was branded and gone. Frank raised both hands above his head to indicate that it was finished; then he leisurely coiled his rope.

The M J camp was still under the trees near the ranch-house. Already most of the men had gone scampering to camp. Cam and Frank were talking to Kinney, while Clemmie sat on her horse waiting for them. She was in the thrall of that age-old love lure. She was going to talk to this man, whether he would or no.

"I'll race you to the Mary Jane, Frank," she said.

"That wouldn't be fair to my little horse, Miss Jackson. He's thrown too many steers. I'd be delighted to ride with you, though," and he rode to her side.

"Just a minute, Cam!" called Tom Kinney, and Cam said "'Dammit!" under his breath when he turned back.

When he had answered a few questions Kinney wanted to ask, Frank and Clemmie were a quarter of a mile away, riding slowly towards the ranch-house.

"There's hell again," the grizzled old puncher muttered. "No gettin' away from her. I wonder who'll kill him." Then he jogged on after them, not trying to overtake them.

"Do you believe in first impressions, Frank?" asked Clemmie.

"That depends," and he flashed her a smile. "Now, if it's horses or men, I'd swear by my first impressions, but I——"

"Well, go on."

"I hate to think first impressions are always true."

"Why?"

"Because you didn't get a very good impression of me, and——"

"And you didn't get a very good impression of me, so we're even."

"I don't think so, because you probably didn't care what my first impression of you might be, and I——"

"Did you?"

"Miss Clemmie, I never sat into a game with a card up my sleeve in my life, and I won't do it now. I've been hit by a lot of hurtful things in my life, but nothing ever hurt as much as what you said to me that afternoon."

"Why?"

"In the first place, because it wasn't true, and I knew it. In the next place, because it was unjust, after what I'd saved you from, and from the first moment I saw you I didn't want to think you'd be unjust."

"Can't you forget?"

"No, ma'am. I guess it's unfortunate for me that I can't, but I'm that way. I can do something better. I can forgive an error—if I'm asked to."

"What I said then has hurt me, too, but I didn't realize it at once. I've been seeking three days for an opportunity to apologize. I didn't expect forgiveness, for what I said would be hard for a man like you to forgive."

"You mean you don't want forgiveness?"

"No! I didn't hope for it now, but if I hadn't hoped to be forgiven some time I wouldn't have had the courage to apologize."

They went on talking, and by the time they reached the drab, grim old ranch-house, whatever mischief was to come of it all was done. They were alike, positive and impulsive in their likes and dislikes. When love comes to such people, it comes full panoplied. There is no budding and blossoming about it. Neither of them knew that the old house was mildewed and ugly. Netiher of them knew that old Mont, sprawled in an armchair, his "buster laig" on a pillow, looked like some ungainly monster. There was nothing but beauty in the world for them as Frank helped her to alight, then walked towards the corral, leading their horses.

Clemmie kissed her father, as she passed him on the gallery. There was some new, vibrant thing about her kiss, and old Mont noticed it, but he was no psychist. When he saw a spade he called it a spade. When he saw something

and didn't know what it was, he kept his trap closed until he found out, which was what he did now.

The moon was at the full, and it was a glorious night, but Frank Carleton didn't go to the ranch-house a-wooing. He hadn't lost his head, and he wouldn't. If he ever married such a woman as Clemmie, he would give her his life unconditionally. Until he did, he'd give sparingly. He didn't try to fool himself that he could do with love as he did with liquor—take it or leave it alone. He knew that from the first moment he saw Clemmie, when she was reading the law to old Shag Sanders, she had been the one woman in the world for him. He knew, too, that when he had told Cam he was ready to toss a coin to determine his career, it was because he saw no hope of winning this one woman, and nothing else mattered. During all the rough stuff he had gone through since coming to the Mary Jane, it had made little difference to him what happened. Now it was a very different matter.

The other men, tired from the long day's work, sought their blankets about on the ground under the trees. Cam and Frank were sitting a little away apart, smoking.

"Cam," asked Frank, "do you suppose this war in the Little River country is over?"

"No. It won't ever stop until either Old Man Mont is ruined or killed on the one side, or two other fellows are killed on the other side. Old John Banks is afraid of Mont. They was always friendly until Bert killed Curly that day. That one little bullet started a heap of hell."

"Was Curly a favourite of Mr. Jackson's?"

"No," replied Cam, slowly, knowing full well what was in Frank's mind. "Curly was just a good, square, likeable boy. He'd been on the ranch here for two-three year. He was kinder on his uppers when old Mont taken him in, and he appreciated it. I'd like to know what Bert said to Curly that day to make him draw—if he did draw—and I reck'n he did, for his gun was on the ground."

"Is Bert a cold killer?"

"I don't know. He's killed two, Curly and another young fellow. Bert's counted swift with a gun, and neither one of them wasn't. I aim to kill Bert for something."

"Frank didn't ask any more questions.

"Not finding things out until afterwards makes a hell of a lot of difference sometimes," old Cam said, after several minutes of silence. "'Some things I found out after it was too late, dang nigh ruint all they ever was to me that was any account. I like you, Frank. You're my idea of a human, and I'm going to tell you all I know of this mess—on your account. They ain't much of it."

"All right, go ahead."

"Well, when I come back here after the war, I went to work for old Mont Jackson. Mont's the squarest man in Texas, but he's got some queer ideas and when he's got one he'll fight for it. Him and old John Banks had been neighbours for years, and he believed in Banks a whole lot. Their woman folks was plumb thick and neighbourly too. They was the two richest families in the Little River country. Old Man Mont ain't bad about holdin' his head too high to see poor people, and neither is his wife. Still, they're human. Mrs. Banks and Mrs. Jackson began planning to marry Bert and Clemmie before they was weaned."

Cam stopped to light a cigarette. Frank moved restlessly, but said nothing.

"I don't think Mont ever egged the match on, but he was knowin' to it, and he didn't object that ever I heard of," Cam went on. "Come last Christmas, and Bert and Clemmie quarrelled about something, and she cut him cold and went about some with Curly. Just to aggravate Bert, I think, for all the liking Clemmie ever had for Curly was just like for a brother that was two-three years younger than her. Then Bert, he kills Curly. Nobody knows just what for, but I don't believe it was about Clemmie, though Bert was sore about that."

Cam stopped and studied judicially about the next revelation he was going to make.

"Old John Banks is a sort of enigmy," he continued finally, when he had his thoughts fitted to his quaint language. "I never did take to him, because his eyes ain't cut just the right way of the leather for me. Still, he was reckoned a good man in the Little River country, and maybe he was ontel the temptation got too strong. They's a heap more thieves born than they is working at the trade. A big chance of 'em is honest because they're afraid to be crooked. Then, when trail-driving began and they was a real good

chance for John Banks to make some money by selling his neighbour's stuff and nobody the wiser, he just nacherly went to work at the trade he was born for. I been knowing for five year that old John was rustlin' Mont's cattle, but I couldn't tell Mont. He'd 'a' just about shot me for traducing' the good name of his neighbour and friend. It was about a year ago that Mont began to take this anti-rustlin', herd-cutting thing serious. The day Curly was killed, Mont and Old John Banks had a big argument in the Bronco saloon, over to Paint Hill, and——"

"Yes, I heard that."

"You heard it?"

"Sure. I was sitting there by the fire," and Frank went on to explain his presence there.

"I see. Well, you know as much about this then as I do, and maybe more."

"No. All I know is what happened in the saloon. I rode out of town while the excitement was going on."

"Well, when we all come away from Curly's grave some sort of doubt was in Mont's mind, and onregenerit hell was in his face. Still, he never would believe old John was a rustler, not even when you told him nor when you shot Parker up. He didn't believe it until you showed him. Now Mont, he's the best damned stayer in the world, but when he goes quit—you heard what he said to John Banks and Bert. He meant it, and Banks knows it. John Banks is as afraid of old Mont as a preacher is of hell. The first chance either old John or Bert gets, when Mont ain't lookin', they're goin' to kill him."

"Do you think Bert would kill him?"

"Yes, he would if he had a chance, but I don't aim for him to have any chance. I told you I was going to kill Bert, and now I'll tell you why. You recollect that hat we found?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"That was Bert Banks' hat. He comes here with Ace Porter to burn the house and then run off the cattle while we tried to put it out. He didn't have no luck, but that don't excuse him none. I just figger that a damned varmint like that ain't got no business living. If I'd go to hell for killin' him—and I don't believe I would—I'd go anyhow, for I've killed a lot better men."

"' What about Miss Clemmie and Bert?" and there was a strange grating note in Frank's voice.

"That's what I wanted to tell you, mostly. That's the thing that might make a hell of a lot of difference to you, if you heard it afterwards, and it might not make hardly none if you heard it now. Understand, I ain't setting myself up to know much about women. I knew one once that wouldn't had no more sense than to marry me—if I'd ast her. They're apt to do all sorts of fool things, but—I don't believe Clemmie ever ddi love Bert. She was just kinder brought up on the idea of marrying him, like some folks is brought up Republicans and some Democrats, though what the hell anybody wants to bring a child up Republican for is more than I can understand. Anyway, Clemmie was brought up to marry Bert Banks, which is just as bad, and maybe worse.

"I'll say this—Clemmie wouldn't play no double game. She's too much like Old Man Mont for that. If she ever did love a man she'd go half-way to hell for him, and if she really ever loved Bert there's where she'll go for him."

"Thank you, Cam," said Frank, and the conversation was closed.

Frank Carleton's short hour of hope and happiness was ended. Whatever may have been Clemmie's dreams that night, his were far from pleasant. In fact he didn't sleep enough to dream much. The burden of his waking thoughts was that there should never be a doubt in his mind about his woman. She'd have to come all the way to hell for him. Then he'd feel safe with her. He told himself that but for Cam and Old Man Mont, both of whom he admired, and the fact that he would leave them in the midst of war with the J Bar B, he'd take his men and ride from there in the morning.

Unconsciously, he was lying to himself. He was going to stay because he wanted to know how far Clemmie Jackson would come for him. Also because he wanted one more fight with the J Bar B. He told himself that it was in the interest of the old code of cattledom for which his father had died. He lied to himself again. It was the same primitive instinct that causes any animal to fight for its mate.

Somewhere down the little River Valley, a hungry coyote sat on a little mound and howled defiance at the world, while nine thousand chances for a meal grazed in smelling distance of him. Tossing wakefully on his blankets, within call

of the one thing he most desired on earth, Frank's soul was knowing a hunger that the physical pangs of the coyote could never equal.

CHAPTER XII

CLEMMIE GOES ALL THE WAY

DAWN broke on a glorious April morning. Clemmie was up early, a song on her lips as she went about the grim old Mary Jane ranch-house. Out in the yard roses were in bloom and fragrance filled the air. Clemmie went out to gather roses, ostensibly. Actually she went out to catch a glimpse of Frank, but she failed. Other men she saw about the cow-camp, but not Frank, and she wondered. She continued to wonder on through the forenoon. She had no premonition that when she spoke to Frank Carleton again it would be under strange circumstances. There was no mystery about the fact that she didn't see him about the cow-camp. It was simply that he and Cam and a dozen others had ridden away at day-break to keep a promise to Tom Kinney. That was that they would help him start the great herd and see it safely off the Mary Jane range.

While Clemmie was still wondering, the nine thousand cattle strung out and started. Slowly they wound across the wonderful Little River Valley. At the line of the J Bar B range Cam and his men dropped back in a little group, and Tom Kinney rode up to them.

"Well, fellers," said he, "I reck'n here's where we part. I'll try to make it to the old Mary Jane for a night as I come back. Tell Old Man Mont good-bye for me and pat him on the back. There won't be many more crooked herds come up this old trail if he don't quit—and he won't. He ain't a quitter. They don't be many more years of trail-driving, and mostly the herds'll go farther west. This is the plumb middle of Texas and will all be farms pretty soon. Bood-bye!"

He wrung their hands and, whirling his horse, galloped away after the herd. Here was a real trail-driver, the kind to whom Texas is building a monument to-day. Candley had

spat his venom back down the trail, and it had passed over Tom Kinney like a breath of foul air that he refused to breathe, but farther on it might be another matter.

The M J men rode slowly across the country towards the ranch. Cam and Frank were a little way behind the others.

"Well, the old valley's clean again," said Cam. "It's always been customary for old Man Mont to let his stock winter back in the roughs, then throw 'em down the valley on this good grass in the summer-time. He's throwed 'em all back into the roughs this spring."

"'Getting them out of the way of trail-herds," said Frank.

"Maybe so. If that J Bar B outfit was out of the way the country might be as peaceful as it looks," and the old puncher dropped into thoughtful silence.

"Here's yo' chuck," said the cook as the men dismounted at the camp. 'Eat it up so's I can clean up and get away from here. Mars'r Mont's got both boots on, and his bronco's already saddled. He's goin' to take the whole outfit to town, pay off, an' give a party. Lawdy, Lawdy, if'n I can jes' und me one mo' rigger can shoot craps. Uh—huh!"

The cook was right. Old Man Mont limped out and mounted his horse. He was still pretty pale from loss of blood and his few days in the house, but he sat straight in his saddle.

"All right, boys, let's go to town," he called as he rode to the camp.

No second call was needed. Every man's horse was saddled and ready. Even the cook had roped out an old broom-tailed plug and put his chicken-stealing saddle on it. Would they go? For six months they had not known the jingle of coin in their pockets. They were not only human, but they were cowboys. They'd all drink. Some would get drunk, perhaps. Most would stay in town while their money lasted. When night came some would gamble, some would go to the dance halls. It was a holiday. There was no urgent work to be done, now that the steers were sold, and they'd enjoy the respite to the fullest.

Clemmie stood at a window and saw them ride away. Once she caught a glimpse of Frank, as he and Cam joined the jolly, laughing throng and rode away down the worn old trail

that led to Paint Hill. She knew what these holidays meant, and she had some knowledge of what a wild revel it might grow into. She wondered, as millions of other women have wondered about the men they wanted to think perfect, if Frank would do the things she had heard cowboys did.

As the drumming of hoofs died away, a great, lonely silence fell over the M J. Even the wrangler was gone. He had turned the *remuda* loose, and the horses were grazing a little way down the valley in front of the house. Only Jim, the house cook, remained about the place.

"Huh! I ain't got no time to mess with them cheap Paint Hill niggers," he sad said. "I'se gwine save up; then this summah I'se gwine to Jefferson, wheh they's some quality, an' mebbe on to Shrevepo't—if my luck holds."

With his work finished, Jim was now asleep in the shade of an umbrella china in the back yard. Mrs. Jackson was in her room, worrying over her blasted hopes while she studied out a list of things to tell people to do. The silence of the place was oppressive. Clemmie wondered how she would ever pass the long afternoon. She went up to her room and looked down the valley from her window. Beyond the little cluster of horses, peacefully grazing and their glossy coats glistening in the sunshine, not a moving thing was to be seen. That immense valley looked as if a pestilence had swept it of all living objects. She lay down on the bed and fell asleep.

It was mid-afternoon when she woke with a start. The very world was filled with a faint, low rumbling, moaning voice. She sprang from her bed and looked out the window. Thousands upon thousands of cattle were streaming into the valley. Another trail herd! And the men all away from home. What must she do? Riding ahead of the cattle, and coming directly towards the Mary Jane, were a dozen or more men.

Hastily Clemmie put on her riding clothes, and without alarming her mother she ran to the corral and saddled her horse. She never knew why she did this. It was an atavism, handed down to her by some resourceful herdsman who could think and talk best from the back of a horse. As she mounted she heard a thunder of hoofs. The *remuda*, disturbed by the approaching riders, came storming to the open gate of the horse trap, entered, whirled and snorted at these stangers. Clemmie closed the gate and fastened it. Then

she rode out to meet the men, who, by this time, were near the corner of the big yard.

Candley had known that his venomous message would find lodgment; coming up the trail he had passed two herds, one a day's drive behind the other. It was, in fact, one herd, driven in two sections because there were too many cattle to handle in one herd. When Candley's messenger met the first herd, it stopped until the other came up, and the two trail-bosses held a pow-wow. One of them, who was really the chief of the outfit, was a great shaggy, dirty brute, with bleary eyes and matted red whiskers. He wore two guns and had every oath and obscene eptihet known to depravity on his lips.

"Well," said he, to his companion boss, "reck'n you heard the news?"

"'Bout Shag?"

"Yes. That damned M J outfit has got to be teached a lesson," and he went into a frightful fit of obscene profanity. "Leave it to me, and I'll teach 'em, damn 'em."

"You're the big boss."

"All right. Throw everything together, and we'll see how long it'll take 'em to cut it and what they'll look like when they get through."

There were a hundred men with the consolidated herd, the last of the cattle pirates of the coastal plain. The herd was stolen as it went. It had swept the counry as it came on, taking everything. There were widows in tis wake whose children were crying for milk because the last lone cow had been stolen. A more villainous crew of pirates never looted a town on land or scuttled a ship at sea. They were the last of their clan in the coast country. They had stolen twenty thousand cattle and were stealing as they went. Few of them would ever attempt to return to the coastal plain. They would sell their cattle, divide the spoils, and scatter to the great West, which was just beginning to develop as a range country. It was a dozen or more of these pirates, led by their chief as spokesman, who now confronted Clemmie.

"Is this the M J ranch?" he asked, without other greeting or even raising his hat.

"Yes."

"Are you the outfit?" and there was a leer in the brute's eyes.

"No, I'm not the outfit. My father and the men are not at home. What do you want?"

"Well, we might want a good many things before we're through. Understand this outfit cuts herds, hell or no hell."

"They cut all herds that cross the M J range," replied Clemmie bravely.

"Oh, they do. Well, I'm bringin' mine in close so's it'll be handy. It's just a little herd, but I don't believe you can cut it by yo'self. Reck'n we'll have to wait until the men folks come in. Won't you go down to our camp and keep us company until they come in?"

There had been an oath for every breath in his conversation and obscenities that Clemmie had never heard. Many that she couldn't even understand. The brute had purposely insulted her a hundred times, knowing that nothing else would so enrage a band of honest, respectable cowboys as an insult to a woman. Secure in numbers, he expected that she would report to her father what he had said and that, wild with rage, the M J outfit would rush headlong to destruction.

At first Clemmie's face flamed with anger; a little later it flushed with shame and now it was white with fear. Before the rustler chief's last word was finished she whirled her horse, drove home the spurs, and dashed away along the trail to Paint Hill.

Old Man Jackson had ridden leisurely into the cow town. He dismounted and limped into the bank. Here he paid his men and told them to have the good time that was coming to them. The boys scattered to their favourite places of recreation. An hour passed. Everybody had had a few drinks, but nobody was drunk. Old Cam Sneed, Frank and the three old Arrowhead punchers had taken a round or two of drinks and were standing in front of a small quiet saloon, across the street from the bank and a few doors father down.

The bank was on the east side of the main street on a corner. Across the side street, to the south, was the Bronco saloon. Immediately across the main street, and diagonally across from the bank, was the Buster. On the other of the four corners was the one big general store, and next to it the little saloon in font of which stood Frank and his companions. Old Man Mont was still in the bank. Old Tiofolo, who didn't mix much with the American punchers and who had taken it on himself to help the crippled ranchman about, was

leaning against a post of the awning, waiting patiently for his charge to come out.

Morton, who had become very affable and attentive, now that Jackson had broken his debt in half and promised to become a valuable customer, came to the door with Mont.

"You've won the first skirmishes, Mr. Jackson, and I believe you'll finally win the fight you're making for honest cow business, but be careful!" Morton said, standing at the open door, "Watch the step as you go down with that game leg."

"Oh, I'm all right," replied old Mont. "Ain't goin' to romp around on this busted laig much. Just goin' across and pay my store account; then I'll go home and let the boys have their fun."

Old Mont walked out and limped towards the corner, intending to cross to the big store. Just then two men who had come along the side of the bank turned the corner of the building and faced him.

"Now, then, you damn' trouble-maker; I've got you where I want you!" shouted old John Banks, with Bert by his side. He jerked his gun and threw it on old Mont.

There was a spurt of flame from the awning post behind old Mont, but it was a fraction of a second too late. Not too late to save Jackson's life, but the bullet from Banks' gun passed through his right arm instead of his heart, as intended. Tiofolo's bullet had struck Banks' gun as he pulled the trigger, shattered his hand and passed on into his body. Mont's gun, which he was drawing, clattered to the sidewalk as the bullet struck his arm. He caught an awning post with his left to keep from falling. Frank Carleton and his three Arrowhead men ran out into the street, where they could see into the side street, and where they were joined by Tiofolo. Behind John Banks and Bert were twenty J Bar B gunmen. They had learned that the M J outfit was in town and had slipped in to pot them while they were scattered.

No witness ever could have told just what happened then. Only one incident stood out from the rest. Old Cam Sneed's gun roared as he ran across to Mont Jackson's side, and Bert Banks threw up his arms and fell.

"Get inside the bank, Mont!" cried Cam.

"No!" roared Mont. "Put my gun in my left hand. I'll face 'em, damn 'em!"

Cam jerked up the gun, and put it in his left hand, but it was needless. Never another J Bar B man turned the corner of that bank. It was then that the turbulent old cow town witnessed a sight such as it had never seen before and about which old-timers talk to this day. Five men standing boldly out in the cross-street bravely facing four times their number. When Banks and his son fell their followers hesitated a moment, and that halt was fatal. Frank and his old Arrowhead men fired thirty shots in less than half as many seconds, advancing into the side street as they fired. Every bullet found a mark, notwithstanding bullets were spattering all about them.

The other M J men came running from the Bronco and Buster and sent vengeful bullets after the fleeing survivors, but it was needless. Half a dozen men and three horses lay dead in that shambles, and not one of those who fled but had a bullet somewhere in his body.

As the firing ceased old Mont Jackson glanced up the street and saw, far out at the edge of town, a familiar horse coming under whip and spur.

"My God, Cam!" gasped old Mont. "Yonder comes Clemmie! Stop her, for God's sake, before she sees this mess!"

Without time to get a horse Cam ran up the street and, two blocks away, met Clemmie and stopped her.

"Don't go down there, Clemmie," he panted, taking hold of her bridle.

"Where's Daddy and—and Frank?"

"They're down there."

"Then I'm going. I'll go anywhere they go."

"But, Clemmie, it's—it's hell down there," pleaded Cam, still holding the bridle.

"Turn me loose," she stormed, "or I'll ride over you! I'd go to hell to be with them, if they were there." Suddenly swerving her mount and driving home her spurs, she threw old Cam to the earth and tore on down the street.

The fight was over, and the men were gathering around old Mont, who was the only one seriously hurt. Clemmie's horse slid to a stop; Frank helped her down, and a moment later she was sobbing out the story of the trail-herd and the insults of the trail-boss on her father's breast, while he tried to put his wounded arm around her and grimaced with pain.

"I reck'n this is about the end, boys," od Mont said, when she had finished and quieted a bit. "When they go to makin' war on my women falks, after shooting me to rags, I don't see what chance I got," and there was a note of despair in the old giant's voice.

"Let me make a suggestion, Mr. Jackson," said Frank, who stood near and whose face had gone livid with rage at Clemmie's recital. "You get your arm dressed, and then you and Miss Clemmie ride slowly on home. We'll go have it out with that trail outft."

"No, no, no! I'm going with *you*!" cried Clemmie.

Frank's face flushed. She had followed him to hell, and now she wanted to follow him through it.

"No, Clemmie," he said, in tender tones, shot through with a little note of command. "Stay with your father—now,"

A minute later the M J riders were mounted and cries of "Let's go!" were echoing in the street.

"Hold 'em, Cam!" begged Frank. "They won't listen to me. Keep 'em together. If we scatter into that mess we'll all be killed. I know the gang we're going up against."

Cam quieted the boys down, and they rode out of town in a body, leaving someone else to clean up the mess that had been made. A mile from the Mary Jane they halted for a consultation.

"Boys," said Frank, "we're mad, and we feel like we can whip the whole world, but we can't. There's a hundred of those hellions, and they're real killers. We'll whip 'em if we go at it right. We'll all get killed if we don't."

"Well, what do you suggest?" snapped Cam. "Mrs. Jackson is in the house by herself, and there's no time to waste."

"All right. Let me talk to you a minute." Cam and Frank rode a little way from the others, and Frank went on: "I've got a scheme that'll work. Give me Tiofolo, and you and the other boys go on to the ranch and talk to those fellows. Talk to 'em as long as they'll talk. Don't lose your head and start a fight until you have to. Maybe by that time we'll be there. I'd like to do the talking but I'm afraid to."

"No, you ain't afraid. What is it?"

"Yes, I'm afraid, Cam, for the first time in my life. I want to kill the man that talked that way to Clemmie, and if I see him I'll do it. Then they'll kill me, and I don't want to die—now."

"I don't blame you a damned bit," said old Cam dryly. "Take Tiofolo and pull out. I don't know what you aim to do, but it can't make things no worse and it may help."

"We want an extra saddle," said Frank, when they had returned to the others. Everybody wondered why, but nobody asked, because they couldn't see where it was to come from.

"You-all can take my old shell, Mr. Frank," said the cook, his eyes white with terror in the gathering dusk. "I ain't goin' to need nothin' but a skillet and lid, a big iron spoon an' a dishrag the balance of my whole bawn nacherl life. Nossir, not me!"

There was a general laugh at the cook as he peeled his old shell from the plug and mounted bareback.

"You'll want the bridle, too, Mr. Frank?" he asked.

"No, we won't need the bridle," replied Frank. "We're all set now. Hold 'em as long as you can, and we'll do the rest." With Tiofolo carrying the extra saddle, they turned east, into the timber that skired the valley to the north of the Mary Jane.

Half an hour later Cam and his men reached the ranch. Sure enough, the trail boss and thirty of his rogues were there, waiting. They hadn't disturbed Mrs. Jackson but were waiting for the men, feeling sure that Clemmie had gone after them.

"Are you old Mont Jackson?" demanded the chief of Cam, who rode at the head of his men.

"No, sir. Sneed's my name. Cam Sneed. I'm just sorter actin' foreman. Mr. Jackson was shotten up some, in a little rukus in town."

"Oh, he was. Damn' good thing. He'd prob'ly been shotten up a damn' sight worse if he'd been here."

"I dunno. He's shotten right smart," and Cam, at that moment, would have gotten by easily for a half-wit.

"What I want to know is about his herd-cuttin'. Understand he's been cuttin' 'em, hell or no hell."

"Yes, sir, he's been cuttin' some right smart, but he ain't here now, and I dunno whether he'd want to cut yo'n or not."

"I don't know what he'd *want* to do, but I damn' shore know he won't do it. I've got a hundred men, and cuttin' don't go with us."

"Well, now, I don't reck'n Mr. Jackson knowed them many men ever went with one herd. Mebbe he wouldn't want to cut it if he knowed that. How many cattle y'all got?"

"Twenty thousand," roared the big boss. "Yo' little outfit couldn't cut 'em in a week if we'd let you."

"I dunno. Mr. Jackson cuts right rapid when his cutter's workin' good."

On went the talk, Cam killing every moment of time he possibly could with clownish remarks and foolish questions. The trail boss swore and used fighting words fifty times, but Cam had himself and his men in hand. He didn't know what Frank meant to do, but he had promised to hold these men as long as he could, and he was doing his best. He did a little figuring as he went along. If there were a hundred men with the outfit, thirty were here. The other seventy were scattered around a loosely bedded herd that must be a mile or more across.

The horse-trap at the Mary Jane was a little pasture containing a quarter section. The north fence was a half-mile from the house. Frank had heard Clemmie tell her faher that the horses ran into the trap and she closed the gate. Breaking the north fence, he and Tiofolo rode into the trap. The *remuda* was grazing near the north fence. They rode into it and in a twinkling both their ropes went on to the same horse and literally dragged it out into the woods back of the pasture. The animal they had caught was old Rainmaker, an outlaw and a killer. Gentle enough to handle, but once a saddle was cinched on him he became a maniac. Rainmaker was a beautiful animal possessed of wonderful strength. He had killed one man and had crippled half a dozen. Never had he been known to stop pitching until he threw his man, and he always pitched in a straight line.

Half a mile back from the fence Rainmaker was snubbed between two trees and one foot was tied up. The cook's old shell was cinched on him. Then a saddle blanket with two rocks, as heavy as a man, wrapped and tied in it, were thrown over the saddle and lashed fast. After that, with the demon of rage boiling in him, the outlaw was taken to the edge of the timber, snubbed fast between two saddle-horns, headed

straight for the sleeping herd, and turned loose. He passed within fifty yards of a night-herder and went in among the cattle, while Frank and Tiofolo rode with all speed for the ranch.

Just when Cam's temper had reached the breaking-point, his quick ear caught the muffled roar from down the valley.

"What's that?" said the trail driver.

"Wouldn't wonder it's a little thunderstorm comin' up," drawled Cam. "We have 'em here, sometimes. Which one of you gents was it talked to the young lady this evening,"

"That's cattle running!" said the big outlaw, paying no attention to Cam's question.

"Yes, I reck'n it is, but you didn't answer my——"

"It was me, damn you!" roared the trail-boss, reaching for his gun. "What the hell you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothin' I reck'n," and the last word reached the outlaw's ears at the same instant a bullet reached his heart.

Half the trailers had already started for the stampeded herd. The others saw they were about to be caught in a trap, and fled after them, with bullets whining around them, just as Frank and old Tiofolo galloped up.

"Listen at 'em roar!" said Frank. "They'll be at the mouth of the Brazos by morning. It worked all right, but——"

"But what?"

"I hate for that trail-boss to get away with what he said to Clemmie."

"He didn't," drawled old Cam. "I taken advantage of yo' absence and killed him for you."

Just then the doctor from Paint Hill drove up with old Mont and Clemmie in his buckboard. They went into the house, and the doctor talked to Cam and Frank a little and told them to send in and get Mont's and Clemmie's horses.

"Mont ain't hurt much," he informed them. "He's a fool for luck. The bullet just grazed the bone and didn't break it. Tore the muscles to rags. Arm may be a little stiff, but it'll come all right. If that girl don't go to bed she's goin' to be a sick woman. No human can go through what she has and not break down. Get up!" and the rattley old buckboard spun off down the road.

Cam and Frank went to the house. With his right arm in a sling, and his " busted laig " on a pillow, old Mont heard the story of Rainmaker and the stampede.

" Well, I'll be damned!" he roared, slapping his good left leg with his good left hand. " Excuse me, Clemmie. We couldn't 'a' cut that herd in a year. I wondered a lot what old Rainmaker was fit for and come dang nigh shooting him fifty times. Frank, you got mighty nigh human intelligence."

" Daddy!" cried Clemmie, who had sat through the whole recital and showed no signs of a break-down.

" Cam," said old Mont, with a twinkle in his eyes. " I want you and Frank to eat dinner here at the house to-morrow like humans. I think it'll be Sunday. If it ain't it ought to be. Let's all get to bed."

CHAPTER XIII

THE FRUIT OF THE LEADEN SEED

CAME morning, and peace was over the Little River Valley. It was a peace that had come to stay. Cattle would graze the wonderful range undisturbed until the ploughshare turned the sod, burying the flowers that would give place to fields of cotton and of corn, while the big herds of cattle with their troubles and their romance drifted farther and farther west.

Candley's effot had been wasted, and the J Bar B was no more as a rustler's stronghold. The big herd ran all night. It didn't go to the mouth of the Brazos, as Frank had suggested, but it went far and scattered wide. Grey dawn found the cattle in little bunches, standing with drawn flanks and eyes staring like door-knobs. Hundreds of them had been killed in the run.

The crooked trail-drivers had gathered at sunrise, worn with the wild night, and the fruits of their pillage snatched from their hands by a little band of dauntless men whom they had planned to teach a lesson that would never be forgotten in the Little River country. There was worse in store for them. While they were meditating upon the situation in which they found themselves, a party of infuriated citizens from the prairies north of Austin came upon them. A battle was fought, and

a few of the cattle pirates escaped. Hundreds of the cattle were gathered and returned to their rightful owners. Some were driven back to the coastal plain, from where the stealing had begun.

Never again did a herd attempt to cross the Little River Valley without being cut. The story of old Mont Jackson's fight spread down the trail to where the salt waters lapped on shingly beach, and up the trail to the head of the Brazos, and even on to the broad prairies of the Indian country and to Dodge City, then the Mecca of the great trail-herds. For years rustlers talked of it with fear in their hearts, and honest men referred to it as a concrete example of what one outfit could do when they felt that they had justice for an ally. No longer was it a task to get ranchmen, big and little, to join the effort to enforce the unwritten law of the cow country. There was a new day coming for the cattle business in Texas.

Two years later—on the fifteenth of February, 1877, to be exact—there met at the frontier town of Graham, on the head waters of the Brazos River, a body of determined men. They were grim-faced old fellows, and they had met for a grim purpose. They had profited by Mont Jackson's demonstration of what a few men can do if they put their hearts into the task and have justice on their side in the fight. There on that day was organized one of the greatest industrial associations in the world—the Texas Cattle Raisers' Association. No, Mont Jackson wasn't elected president. He never was elected to any office. He wasn't an office-seeker, but, as old Cam Sneed put it, 'He was the best dang private that ever pulled a gun in a fair fight."

When the officers had been elected, and a committee appointed to draft a constitution and by-laws, the officers and prominent men in the little meeting foregathered at the quaint old Richards House. The newly-elected president was standing on the long gallery, when a tall, gaunt, grey old giant, with slight limp in his right leg and a slight stiffness in his right arm, walked up to him.

"Colonel Carter, the cow business is looking up right smart," he said. "We ain't got as good stuff as we ought to have. These longhorns will have to go. I aim to begin to improve my herd some. Got a couple of thoroughbreds here I'd like for you to look at."

They turned and walked down the gallery of that historic old hostelry. Presently a handsome, sun-tanned man and a regally beautiful woman rose at their approach.

"Colonel Carter, this is my son-in-law, Mr. Carleton, and this is my daughter, his wife," Old Man Mont went on. "They're the thoroughbreds I wanted to show you."

So was organized the Texas Cattle Raisers' Association. The thing that humanized and stabilized one of America's leading industries. An industry about which a thousand romances have been written. There are a million more that never will be told because the men who enacted them, who stood herd on stormy nights, who followed stampedes over dangerous ground, who slept beneath old "yaller" slickers on which raindrops pattered, are rapidly approaching that last camp on the checkered trail of life. Soon they will unsaddle and turn their "broncos" over to that Universal Wrangler, who always rides a black horse. Such were the men who, in the stormy days of the trail, enforced the unwritten law of cattledom.

THE END

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